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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY, 1976
VOL. 38, NO. 5

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NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER

DEATH IN A SMALL PACKAGE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Veteran flier Bill Wildon has to be the redhead's most difficult client. Not only are two sets of vicious criminals on his tail, but Wildon seems determined to accomplish his own destruction and, ultimately, that of Mike Shayne as well. ..... **2 to 43**

DEATH IN THE DEEP SOUTH

A TIME TO KILL

by TALMAGE POWELL

Job Roberts fell in love with Jan Harkness at first sight. He had no inkling that she was psychotic and even when bloody murder proved her madness, he stuck with her. Not until her insanity came under suspicion did his doubt begin. ..... **44 to 80**

SIX NEW SHORT STORIES

BLOOD ON THE SNOW
HERBERT HARRIS **81**

THE DOG
PAULINE C. SMITH **87**

BEACH PARTY
JAMES HOLDING **101**

THE GIRL IN THE YELLOW BIKINI
PHILIP M. MARGOLIN **107**

A BIT OF STRING
KATHLEEN HERSHEY **122**

A BETTER WAY
WILLIAM E. CHAMBERS **125**

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DEATH IN A SMALL PACKAGE

Barnstorm pilot Bill Wildon would not fly smuggled narcotics. But the load he accepted was more valuable than any narcotic and a great deal more deadly to have on his hands.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

"YOU'RE GOING TO have to help me find my father, Mr. Shayne." The girl spoke in a tone of such intensity that the hardened Miami private detective knew he'd find her appeal hard to resist.

The redhead shifted in the chair of his second floor Flagler Street office and looked at his caller again.

She was a beautiful, seemingly intelligent girl, with a poise and maturity that made it hard for him to realize she was only sixteen years old. She had her father's clear blue eyes, and his hair—although on him it was sandy and on her a soft gold with hints of red.

The last time Shayne had seen Melinda Wildon she was only a leggy ten year old. A lot of very important changes had taken place since then—all of them good to the eyes.

"I didn't even know Bill was missing," Mike Shayne told the

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girl. "What's the old rascal been up to now?"

He remembered Bill Wildon as a good natured, happy-go-lucky fighter pilot in World War Two and as a free-lance flyer in the years that followed. Always he'd been ready for a fight or frolic or a sudden charter to fly to the most improbable parts of the globe. Occasionally, too, he'd pitch an epic binge and vanish for days or even a week at a time.

Probably, Mike Shayne thought, this was what had happened again. Bill Wildon would turn up shortly with a mammoth headache and a lame excuse.

Then Shayne looked at the girl and had a feeling it would not be so this time. She was a young lady—mature and smart and very, very worried He decided to take her seriously.

"Give me the facts," he said.

"He drove away Tuesday morning," she said. "He just drove away and said to look for him in a couple of days. That was all. He never came back."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three weeks, Mr. Shayne. You know that isn't right. Dad never stayed away that long without at least calling to tell me. Not since mother died ten years ago. Besides. . ."

Something about the way she said "besides" made Shayne know it was important. He waited.

She didn't disappoint him.

"There are a lot of things that aren't right, Mr. Shayne. For one, the plane he was supposed to fly is gone. It was parked at Palm Beach Airport in the private and executive plane section—and it's gone."

"I suppose Bill took it as planned," Shayne said.

"Oh no. It's not *that* easy. Dad had a flight plan. I saw him put it in his pocket before he left home. No flight plan was filed for the plane. Nobody saw it go or saw who took it up. You know Dad wouldn't do it that way. Besides, Dad was going on Tuesday morning. The plane was still on the field till Friday afternoon of that week. After that it vanished. It just plain disappeared. No flight plan filed and no record of its checking in at any other airfield in Florida. I inquired."

"That is odd," Mike Shayne agreed. "Still the owner could have moved it himself or hired somebody else to fly it out of the State—or even out of the country to one of the islands."

"I know," she said. "I thought of that—but that isn't all. Dad's car should have been parked at the field if he took the plane out. It wasn't. It just plain vanished. I put out a stolen car

alert—an A.P.B. for the whole state—and Georgia and Alabama. Nothing. No trace."

"That's unusual," Shayne said. "A car is easy to hide. Stolen cars get a quick paint job."

"This one wasn't easy to hide," Melinda insisted. "This car was one of those things nobody who sees it is apt to forget. Dad had only had it a week. It was a foreign sports job from Italy with a special red and gold paint job. A real dazzler. If it was repainted, the body would still give it away. Nobody even saw it drive into the Palm Beach Airport—and believe me there are enough hotrodders and car buffs on the line and maintenance crews there so it couldn't have been missed."

"You don't think your Dad made it to the airport then," the big readhead asked her.

"Not that car he didn't," she said.

"Anything else?"

"Yes," she said. "The money. Before Dad left he gave me five hundred dollars for household expenses. He does that every time he has an out-of-town job. This time was different. He locked another envelope in the drawer of his desk. He said this one was in case of emergencies."

"Did you open it?"

"After he'd been gone for a

week with no word I did. I figured that was an emergency. Was I right?"

"You could have been," said. Shayne. "What was in the envelope?"

"Five thousand dollars was what was in it," she said. "Five thousand dollars in small bills—mostly twenties, nothing over a fifty. Now where did he get that sort of money? Things haven't been that good with us for the last five years at least."

"So?"

"So what can I think, Mr. Shayne? Dad had a job all right—but what kind of job would pay enough to buy that car and have five thousand left over. You and I both know what sort of job that would have to be."

Mike Shayne just nodded. He knew well enough the sort of job Melinda Wildon was talking about.

In the last few years there had been plenty of work for the free lance pilots bringing in marijuana, heroin, cocaine or even diamonds and gold from ships in the Gulf Stream or from out-to-the-way landing strips in the Bahamas and islands of the northern Caribbean.

The system was simple enough. A small plane could carry a valuable payload of small-bulk, high-value contraband. It could come in flying low to avoid radar screens and land at any of a thousand open fields, strips of road or small flying fields in Florida.

The risk was small, the pay high.

Bill Wildon had had few legitimate charters in recent years. He had a home to keep and this beautiful daughter to bring up. Also, he knew every inch of the islands and adjacent waters.

He had contacts on a hundred lonely sandspits.

The temptation could have been very high.

Then Shayne caught himself. There was one false note in that idea. He pointed it out to the girl.

"I know what you mean, Melinda," he said. "But you and I know that most of the contraband is flown in by kids who can't get any other sort of job. The smugglers give them an old beat-up plane. Cheap pilot—cheap plane. If the kid gets through—fine. If he doesn't, the plane is highly insured—so what. Nobody cares about the pilot or what happens to him.

"So who would pay your father at least ten thousand dollars to make one of *those* flights? That is, even if Bill Wildon would take that sort of risk. Your Father isn't a hoodlum, girl."

"I know," she said. "I thought of that, too. But *somebody* gave Dad all that money. He said he bought the car for cash, and the envelope he left had five thousand in it. That isn't my imagination."

"Didn't he give you *any* clue as to what sort of job it was?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just that he'd pick up the plane at Palm Beach and be gone a few days. Please help me, Mr. Shayne. I have the five thousand to pay you with."

"Let's not worry about that till I see if I can do you some good," Shayne said. "Your Dad has been my friend for many years. If he's in trouble, I want to help."

II

THE FIRST THING Shayne did after Melinda Wildon left his

office was to drive to the Palm Beach airport.

It gave him time to think.

At this point, the big man's hunch was that Bill Wildon had probably gone on a protracted bender as a result of suddenly having such a large sum of cash in hand. Wildon had been a barnstorming pilot all his life. His sense of responsibility—except when it came to caring for his daughter—had never been overly developed. He might have gone out on a short binge without realizing how it had stretched out.

On the other hand, the binge might have led him into trouble. That was what Shayne wanted to investigate for a starter.

Moreover, he could not deny the mystery of the vanishing plane, or that of the large sums Wildon had handled. Much as he hated to think it, his friend could well be mixed up with dangerous people in a deal involving that much money.

The people at the Palm Beach airport were not of much help. They remembered Wildon being there and checking over the plane he was supposed to fly—but that had been several days before his scheduled take-off, and he had been very close-mouthed about the impending flight.

"Never said a word about where he was going or why. Of course, we figured he'd file a flight plan later on."

They did remember his new car, though. It seems to have been the sort of flashy job that gets itself remembered by anyone who sees it even once.

They were equally sure the car had not been driven onto the field on the day Wildon was supposed to take off.

"There's no way we wouldn't have noticed it," the men at the gate and in the parking lot said. "No way at all, man. That thing had an impact like a Cape Kennedy launch. It just wasn't here that day."

They could have been wrong, of course, but Shayne was convinced that they weren't.

Nor was anyone of much help about the missing plane, either.

"It was here and then it wasn't. No flight plan. No official check-out. Of course this isn't the biggest field in the world. There's a lot of private planes coming and going. We try to keep track. But if someone wanted to take off without being checked, and wanted it badly enough, he could manage it. We just don't know but that must have been the way it was."

That was clear enough to Mike Shayne. In a crowded time, when numerous small planes were taking off and

landing, it would be easy enough to insinuate one more into the pattern without attracting attention if the pilot knew what he was doing. It couldn't be done with a passenger liner or a big cargo plane—but one of the little executive jobs was something else again.

"The really funny thing," the airport executive said, "is that we can't find a trace of where that plane landed after it left here. We made inquiries at every American field within the plane's cruising range. None of them have it. None of them show any record of its landing or taking off. If it went in the air, we know it would have to refuel—but there's no record. A plane doesn't just vanish, but this one did."

"Unless it flew out of the country," Shayne said.

"That's right. He could have flown it out to the islands someplace."

They left it at that. There was no more to be said.

Before he drove off, Shayne had coffee and apple pie in the airport cafeteria. It gave him a chance to think. By now, he was ready to admit that Bill Wildon hadn't gotten as far as Palm Beach the morning he left home. At least, he hadn't driven his new car into the airport.

He had started this way though.

Shayne began to backtrack his friend mentally. When Wildon left home, what route would he take? The easiest and quickest would have been the Palmetto Bypass to the Sunshine State Expressway, then get off at the Palm Beach exit. That's the way your average man would have gone.

On the other hand, Bill Wildon was not an average man. Most particularly, Bill Wildon with a flashy new car to show off and a pocket full of government lettuce to spend wasn't your ordinary man.

Shayne figured that the pilot would have picked a route allowing for stops at his favorite bars all the way up from South Dade County. That would give him a chance to buy drinks for his friends and show off his new car at the same time.

That was what seemed most logical to the big detective—and he had known Wildon well in the old days. Besides, he had nothing better to go on at this point. It gave him a course of action. Until he could cut Wildon's trail, he was nowhere.

He drove south from Palm Beach, taking the route he felt fairly sure the missing pilot would have taken driving north. The first dozen bars he stopped at gave him nothing at

all. They might not all have been on Bill Wildon's route, but a couple of them should have been. Somebody should have remembered the exuberent pilot and his car.

Nobody did.

Not till he got down to the country back of Fort Lauderdale did the big man hit pay dirt.

It was a roadside bar in a rough section, one frequented by motorcycle riders as well as local patrons.

A couple of the barflies remembered Wildon and his car *and* the free drinks he bought for the house.

"Man, you just couldn't forget those wheels.!"

"You couldn't for sure!"

They hadn't been sure how long the pilot had stayed—or even in what direction he had gone when he left. All they were sure of was that he had been there.

Wildon had gotten at least this far north on his way to the Palm Beach Airport. Shayne now reversed his course. Instead of going south towards Miami, he drove north—and this time he wasn't selective. He hit every bar along the route.

It almost cost him his life.

At the first twenty bars he drew a blank. He almost missed the twenty-first. It wasn't right on the main route but almost an eighth of a mile west on a side road. He would have missed it entirely except for a large sign designed to attract the attention of cars on the main road.

The sign read; BAIT AND TACKLE—HAMBURGERS—BEER AND WORMS—HAPPY SAM'S

Shayne's first reaction was simply; *Beer and worms–what a hell of a combination that is!*

Then the name HAPPY SAM clicked. "Happy Sam" Blerit had hosted a Miami Bar in the old days, an oasis where Shayne and Bill Wildon had done a lot of drinking.

It might not be the same man, but if Wildon had seen that sign, it was a safe bet he'd have gone over to take a look. Shayne decided to do the same.

Happy Sam's was a complex of three or four old frame buildings, sitting all by itself in a block overgrown by brush which had been cut back to form a sizable parking lot for the patrons.

This early in the afternoon there were only about a dozen cars parked—mostly of ancient vintage and rusty and clustered near the bar.

Shayne parked with the others and went on inside. It was a long room with a sagging ceiling, a creaking floor and walls bare of decoration except

for "girlie" calendars and beer and tobacco advertising signs.

Most of the patrons seemed to be regulars. They clustered at one end of the bar, watching golf on a hazy old television set.

The bartender was Happy Sam Blerit all right—but Shayne had trouble recognizing him. Time had dealt hardly with the boniface. He had put on weight—a lot of it and largely flab. His former mop of flaming red hair had shrunk to a rusty halo around a large bald pate. His face was lined and there was a new knife scar on his left cheek.

He mopped the bar listlessly with a dirty rag, kept his eyes cast down and hooded. Shayne didn't greet him, but ordered a beer. He waited for some sign of recognition, didn't get it.

What he did get was a rise of the hairs at the back of his own neck—an instinctive warning of danger that years in his dangerous trade had taught him never to ignore.

Happy Sam must have spotted and recognized him through the window even before Shayne entered the bar. If he chose not to greet an old friend, there had to be a reason—and it wasn't likely to be one that boded well for the big detective.

As usual, Shayne decided to go on the offensive and take the bull by the horns.

"What in hell's the matter with you, Sam?" he demanded as he reached for his beer. "You know me—and we both know it—so why the silent act with an old friend?"

The bartender raised his face to look directly at the big man. "What's to say? That was a long time ago, Shayne—and times change. So hello. Drink your beer in good health."

It set Shayne back, but not for long. "I'm looking for another old friend," he said. "You remember Bill Wildon."

"What if I do—what if I don't," said Happy Sam without enthusiasm. "Suppose I did? What makes you think he'd ever come to a dump like this?"

Shayne decided to run a bluff all the way.

"Bill's missing," he said bluntly, "and I'm looking for him. I've traced his car to this place. I want to know where he went from here."

Happy Sam kept on mopping the bar while he thought that one over. Then he said, "You're right, Shayne, I do remember you. You're one hell of a nosy character. I remember once you get on a trail you never let go—so I'm not going to lie to you now. Wildon was here a while back. I don't know why, and I don't really care. He ain't here now. So finish your beer and get out."

The bartender may have given a signal. Shayne couldn't be sure. All he knew was that three of the toughest looking characters in the knot of patrons at the bar were slowly drifting in his direction. They seemed to be talking among themselves, but instinct told him he was being watched very closely. His every sense was on the alert.

"Where did Bill do?" he asked again.

"How the hell do I know?"

"I don't even *care* how you know," Shayne said. "I just want you to tell me what you *do* know."

That was when the three customers swung clear of the bar and came at him. It was a bad mistake on their part.

They came side by side—aiming to overwhelm him by sheer weight of numbers. They were close enough to figure they'd be on him before he knew they were coming.

It could have worked with somebody else—but Shayne spun to face them the instant they came at him. Instead of backing off, he took a couple of fast steps forward and kicked the man to his right in the groin as he came.

That one lost his breath in an agonized squeal and fell to the floor twisting in pain. He was out of the fight. Before he hit

the floor, Shayne's big hands had each of the others by an ear. He slammed their heads together with a noise like two coconuts being broken.

It didn't quite crack their skulls but they lost all interest in any more fighting. When Shayne let go, they, too, dropped to the floor.

It was just that fast.

Happy Sam said, *"Freeze!"*

He had a sawed-off, double-barelled, twelve-gauge slotgun resting on the bar. The twin muzzles were less than three feet from Shayne's gut.

The detective froze.

The door to the kitchen opened and a woman stepped through into the bar. She opened her mouth and let go with one of the wildest screams

Mike Shayne had ever heard. It went all the way up the scale to a sound like pulling a fingernail over a pebbled glass window.

The remaining patrons of the bar cringed. Happy Sam cringed. Shayne didn't have time to cringe.

His left hand grabbed the muzzle of the shotgun and his body twisted away even as Happy Sam pulled the trigger. The barrels burned in Shayne's hand—and then he had the gun pulled out of Happy Sam's grip.

The load of number-six shot missed Shayne—went past the customers—and demolished a pinball machine against the wall. Shayne dropped the shotgun at his feet.

Then he got Happy Sam by the throat and pulled him across the top of the bar. If the bartender had any further thoughts of conflict, he abandoned them when Shayne cocked back a huge fist.

The rest of the barflies were crowding each other to get out the door.

The woman who screamed. Said in a youthful and surprisingly calm voice, "You don't have to kill him."

Shayne said: "He was trying to kill me when he pulled that trigger. Why should I let him go now?"

"Partly because you owe me for screaming," she said. "Partly because he wasn't really trying to kill you. He was just scared and didn't know what to do."

"I don't scare people that much."

"It wasn't you," she said. "He was scared you'd crowd him into a corner where the really *bad* boys would kill him. That is, if he didn't jump you now. Isn't that right, Pop?"

Shayne took his first good look at the speaker. She didn't look like Happy Sam but she was certainly young enough to be his daughter. In her early twenties, Shayne guessed. She was about five feet seven with long straight blonde hair. She wore a halter and jeans and sandals and a lot too much makeup. Her face was young and hard and wise.

"Is *she* your girl?" Shayne asked.

All he got for an answer was a grunt. Hey realized that he still had Happy Sam by the throat and was choking him hard. He eased his grip, then relaxed it entirely and took his hand away. Happy Sam coughed and wheezed and massaged his throat, but he managed to nod.

By this time, the two men whose heads Shayne had knocked together were beginning to sit up. The one who had

been kicked was still writhing and moaning on the floor

Happy Sam waved at the two with sore heads to pick up their friend and get out—which they did.

"We better talk," he said.

"We better," Shayne agreed.

III

THE FIGHT HAD emptied the bar of customers, so the three of them went into the back room that served Happy Sam as an office. There were an old rolltop desk, three or four chairs, an ancient iron floor safe and a rack of shotguns and hunting rifles on the wall. Shayne kept himself between Happy Sam and the guns.

The bar owner laughed. "You got nothing to worry about, because I ain't about to start fighting *you* again. Not since Connie here screamed and spoiled the one chance I had."

"I didn't want you up on no murder rap, Pop," the girl said. "Likewise, I didn't want him killing you. Screaming just seemed like the best way to calm things down."

"You could of got us both killed that way," her father said.

"I didn't."

"That's not what we sat down to talk about," Mike Shayne said. "What do you two know about Bill Wildon?"

"Maybe nothing at all," Happy Sam said.

"I don't buy," Shayne told him. "In that case you and your boys out there wouldn't have tried to jump me. You know something. Either you can tell me now or I can twist an arm off and get it the hard way."

They thought that over.

"Don't tell him, Pop," Connie said. "He ain't the kind to kill nobody. Not like—"

"Shut up, girl," Happy Sam said. To Shayne, "One thing I got to know, Shayne—how come you're looking for Bill? Who're you working for? That I got to know."

"There's no secret on that," Shayne said. "Bill's daughter came to me because he's missing. She worried about her daddy, that's all. She knows I'm his friend, so she came to me because I'm in the business."

Happy Sam said, "Oh hell" and rubbed the day-old stubble on his chin.

Connie said, "You know, Pop, I think he's telling the truth. I don't think he's working for them at all. I never thought of Wildon having no daughter, though."

"He has a daughter," Happy Sam said. "Is that the truth, Shayne? You really working for the kid?"

"It's the truth."

"Then what do you aim to do

about Bill if you find him. That I need to know."

Mike Shayne decided to tell the truth. "That all depends on Bill. If he needs it, I take him home. At least, I can tell the girl she can stop worrying herself half to death."

"Don't tell him, Pop," Connie said again.

"Hold your peace," her father said. "It's nigh on time I got to tell somebody, girl. Shayne I know. He don't lie. If he says he ain't working for them, he ain't. He knows his job. Maybe he can get this whole mess off of our necks while they's still time."

"Maybe I can," Shayne said. "First I have to know what this is all about. Who *are* these people I'm not working for. It would help me a lot if I knew that."

"We don't rightly know," Connie said.

"That's right, we don't, except they're tough—and I think they aim to kill Bill."

"Start out by telling me what you *do* know."

"Bill came by here that day," Happy Sam said. Shayne assumed he meant the day Wildon vanished. "He'd been drinking and he was driving wheels like nobody ever saw before. Saw my sign from the main road and wanted to show off to an old pal. He had a pocketful of green and was buying drinks.

"He's been here only half an hour when two real hard-looking stiffs drive into the lot. Bill sees them through the window and turns white as a sheet. He goes out the back door when they come in the front and gets to his wheels while they're still in here."

"They heard his motor start and took out after him," Connie interjected.

"Which way did they go?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Not by the main road," Happy Sam said. "They took off back into the farming country to the west. That wasn't all, though."

"Oh?"

"About half an hour later, Bill Wildon came back. Only this time he wasn't so happy. The only thing he was showing off was a gunshot wound in the left arm. He needed help, so we brought him in here and tied it up for him. As soon as he could drive, he took off again. We ain't seen him since."

"He didn't say where he was headed?"

"Not a word."

"And the hoods chasing him? Did they show here again?"

"Not them," Connie said, "but a couple more like them came by the next day, asking after Pop's pal Wildon. Not the same

guys, exactly, but real hard ones like they could all of been brothers. We said we didn't know nothing and they cut out. When you came, we was afraid you were another of the same gang or working with them."

Shayne said, "Thanks." and thought over what he'd just heard. Then he said, "All right, Sam, go back to where you started lying and straighten out the story."

"What in hell do you mean?" said a highly indignant but not very convincing Happy Sam.

"I mean, after you tied up Bill's wound," Shayne said. "He didn't leave here—at least, not in that car he didn't. I'd have crossed his trail—and I didn't. So just where is the car?"

"It's out back in the brush field," Happy Sam admitted. "I got her hid so you couldn't find it nohow."

"You're going to have to show me," Shayne said.

"You told him too much, Pop," Connie said. She picked up a whisky bottle and took a swig from the neck.

"I'd have found out anyway," Shayne said. "Besides, as long as you tell me the truth, I'm on your side—and I believe you tried to help Bill."

"This guy's smart, baby," Happy Sam said. "I know him from way back. Bill wasn't in no shape to drive—what with being drunk and the bullet in him and all. We hid his car and we hid him."

"Where?"

"The car in the brush like I said. I'll show you in a minute. Connie drove Bill out to a shack we own in the back country. The bullet had gone right on through without breaking a bone. It was right under the skin of his back and high up where no vital organs were hurt. I cut it out easy with a jacknife."

"Where is Bill now?"

"He's still out at the shack. We been taking him out food and stuff every couple of days."

"I want to see him," Shayne said.

"Maybe he doesn't want to see you. We better ask him first"

"No. You take me out there and I'll do any asking that's done. You got no choice anyway. I've a gun in my belt just in case you need any persuading. Let's get the show on the road."

The detective spoke with an air of authority that the rest of them had to accept.

"We'll use my car," Shayne said.

Happy Sam's directions took them down a series of back roads, finally onto an unpaved track twisting through the brush and high grass. The

shack was at the end of the line. Once it had been headquarters for a cattle ranching operation, but it was abandoned long before Happy Sam bought up the land on which it stood. It was at least five miles west of the bar.

Happy Sam made Shayne stop a good four hundred yards down the road from the house. He sent Connie on in to explain the strange car and who Shayne was.

"Otherwise, he like to cut out the back into the swamp like."

It was quiet as the men waited. This was too far off traveled roads for any sound of traffic to penetrate. Once a helicopter made a long swing out over the house, but it was fairly high and the sound of its rotor was faint.

In a few minutes, they saw Connie come out of the house and come walking towards them. Halfway there, she stopped and beckoned. They got out and went to her.

"He says come on in. He says keep your face clear so he can see if it's really you. He says he has a gun on you in case it ain't."

They walked to the house. A cot had been set up in the front room of the old shack and when they came in the front door Bill Wildon was sitting there, watching them.

The flier looked haggard and his shoulder was bandaged where the bullet had hit him. There was a stubble of beard on his face, but Shayne's practiced eye told him that his friend had about recovered from the shooting.

He had an automatic pistol shoved through his belt. He looked at the three as they came through the door.

"Well, well," he said. "It *is* Mike Shayne. Long time no see, Mike."

Shayne said, "Melinda is worried about you, Bill."

"I know she is," Wildon said. "It just couldn't be helped."

"What do you mean by that? Sam or Connie could have phoned her easy enough."

"You don't understand," Wildon said. "Sure they could—over a bugged wire. Then the same people who gave me this would have started working on her. Mike, the only way to keep the kid safe was to make sure she knew nothing at all about any of this. They've got to be absolutely sure she doesn't know a thing. Then they leave her alone. Besides, I left her plenty of money—and I figured to be back long before now."

"That reminds me," Mike Shayne said. "Where did all that money come from."

"It's none of your damn business," the flier said.

"So what happens now?"

Happy Sam asked. "You can't stay here much longer, Bill. Every day you do it gets more dangerous for Connie and me. You're well enough to move now. It's time to hit the road."

"I know," Wildon said. "The thing is how and where do I go."

"Maybe I can give you a ride," Shayne said. "That car of yours is about as inconspicuous as a Sherman tank on the highway. Where do you want to go?"

"There's a plane waiting for me at Palm Beach."

"No there isn't."

"What the hell do you mean, no there isn't?"

"There isn't any plane," Shayne explained "Somebody flew it off the field without bothering to tell the control tower people. You wouldn't have any idea *who*, would you?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell *you*," Wildon said. "Got to give it to them though. They're thorough. Don't leave any loose ends at all."

"What in hell are you mixed up in, Bill?" Shayne asked. "You wouldn't have fallen for the dope smuggling racket? You aren't a twenty-five year old footloose barnstormer any more, you know."

"I know that," Wildon said. "What's more, you *know* I wouldn't handle dope in any

way, shape or form. I never used it. I never sold it. I wouldn't transport it."

"Then what *are* you up to?"

"I can't tell you," Wildon said. "I can't, and I won't."

"Give me an idea."

"Well, then—you remember the old days, Mike, how I'd gamble on anything—anytime—any place. That is, if I thought I could figure the odds. Well, they still call me "Calculated Risk" Wildon. That's what this is—a calculated risk. If I win. . ."

"Sure," Mike Shayne said, "and what if you lose? You already had one bullet in you, Bill."

"If I win, it'll be worth it," Wildon said.

"Oh, come on!" said Connie. "I got an idea they may figure *us*

for more loose ends. Let's get out of here before they show up and fly us into a hole in the swamp."

"The girl's right," her father said.

"Yeah," detective agreed. "Grab up your stuff Bill, and let's get out of here."

Bill Wildon's "stuff" was no more than his shoes and jacket and a half-empty bottle. He put them on and went out to the car.

As they were getting into Shayne's car, a helicopter passed overhead again. Shayne couldn't be sure it was the same whirleybird they'd seen before—but it could have been.

He looked up and saw a glint from inside the bubble. It might have been light reflected from a camera lens, the eyepiece of a binocular, even an ordinary pair of eyeglasses—no way at all to tell. The machine made a long lazy circle, then headed back toward the other side of the highway.

Mike Shayne drove slowly over the rough and potholed dirt road. About a mile from Happy Sam's bar, it ran through a stand of mahogany and pin-oak trees. The branches interlaced to make a roof which shut out the sun. Once under this cover, Shayne stopped the car.

"You and Connie get out here," he said to Wildon.

"What?"

"I think there's going to be a reception committee back at the bar," he said. "You two go cross-country. I noticed a barbecue joint on the highway about half a mile north of the cut off to Sam's. Get over there."

"I know the people who run it," Connie said. "I've dated one of the partners."

"That's fine," Shayne said. "Get him to let you use a back room. Wait there till I come and pick you two up. If I'm wrong, I'll be there before you are. If not, you wait if it's two days."

"Why?" she asked, but Wildon cut her off.

"We'll do what Mike says. He usually knows what he's talking about."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Connie asked Shayne.

"As long as we don't have Bill along, we should be," the detective said. "If there *is* anybody there, *he's* the one they'll be looking for. You just sit tight and wait. You promise?"

"I promise," she said.

"Oh sure, sure." Wildon said.

Shayne wasn't quite sure he liked the way the pilot said it, but there wasn't anything he could do about it and he wanted to get going. He drove out of

the little grove and on down the road.

"I've a gun under my shirt," Happy Sam volunteered.

"You may need it," Shayne said.

IV

THERE WAS A BIG CAR parked in the lot by the bar when Shayne and Happy Sam drove up.

"Recognize it?" Shayne asked.

"No. It doesn't belong to any regular customer."

"Okay then," the redhead said. "There's no sense our being complete patsies and both walking into a trap. I'll park out by the road and go into the bar. You go on around back of the main building. Dodge around there till they're busy with me inside. Then sneak up and see if I need help."

Happy Sam nodded. When Shayne parked his car, the bar owner followed directions.

Shayne walked straight to the front door of the bar itself with a firm and confident stride. He didn't slow or hesitate or appear to feel that anything could be wrong.

The door opened inward and to the left of anyone coming in. Shayne slammed it open, *hard*, so it crashed against the wall to his left.

As he came over the sill his right arm shot out and his right hand caught the man standing pressed against the wall there. He caught him completely off balance and yanked him forward.

The hoodlum had his right arm raised and ready to slug Shayne with the butt of the heavy pistol in his hand. He never got the chance to bring the gun down.

Shayne's left hand took the gun from the astonished hoodlum. Then his right hand let go of the man's jacket, caught his right arm and twisted his body to face the big room.

In less than two seconds, Shayne had the helpless hoodlum held in front of him as a shield and was covering the room with the hood's own gun.

He said, "Good afternoon, gentlemen," to the two men standing at the bar.

One was a hood who might have been the brother of the man who had waited at the door. The other was older and better dressed. He was the one who answered.

"Where's Wildon?" he asked.

Both men had guns in their hands.

Shayne had the gun he'd just taken from the hood at the door and his own big Colt .45 in its belt holster back of his right hip. He also had the hood's body held in front of his own body as a shield.

It was a real Mexican stand-off.

He said, "I don't know where Wildon is right now." This was close enough to the truth. "What do you want with him?"

The better dressed type said, "If you don't already know, it's better I don't tell you. *Wildon* knows why we want him all right. He also knows that sooner or later we'll get him. You might as well help it be sooner, because you aren't going to be able to stop us."

Shayne said, "If it's going to be *that* easy, then why bother with me at all?"

"Because you can make it just that much easier," the spokesman said, "and I like things that way. Because you haven't any choice."

"As long as I hold a gun on you, I've got a choice," Shayne said.

"He's got something there, Phil," said the man Mike Shayne was using as a shield.

"He's got nothing," the smooth talker said. "He's going to tell us where that crazy bum is, even if we have to spend *you*."

"I'm telling you nothing," Shayne said, "but just in case I might be able to get a message to Wildon after I leave here, what should I tell him?"

"He knows the message," Phil said, "but just in case, you tell him there's a contract on him. You tell him the contract on Bongo was earned while he was hiding out. You tell him the only chance he's got is to bring it to us."

"Bring *what* to you?"

"He knows what I think you know, too. Anyway, you aren't getting out of here unless we decide to send you."

Shayne had waited long enough for Happy Sam to pick up a gun and come in the back door of the bar. So Shayne took the bull by the horns, lifting his human shield off his feet and literally hurling him at the two men by the bar. For just a moment, the hurtling body still interposed between the big detective and the two hostile guns.

In that moment, Shayne got himself out the door of the bar and slammed it shut behind him. That was when he saw Happy Sam twenty-feet away, holding his sawed-off shotgun in both hands and aimed at the door of the bar.

Shayne dove onto his face on the dirt just outside the door. He was barely in time.

Happy Sam pulled both triggers of the shotgun and the loads from both barrels went over Shayne's head at what would have been normal waist height to smash the panels of the door.

Shayne rolled and was back

on his feet. He took the empty shotgun in one hand and threw it up onto the roof of the building. Then he got Happy Sam's elbow in the other hand and half-pushed, half-hauled him on a run towards the car. The shotgun blast kept the hoods inside away from the front door.

By the time they got to the windows, Shayne and Happy Sam were already at Shayne's car. The big man shoved Happy Sam into the passenger seat and got behind the wheel. In seconds, he had the motor racing and was out of the yard. Nobody even fired at him from the bar.

"I'm sorry," Happy Sam said. "I thought you was them coming out back there."

"Don't make it worse by lying," Shayne said. "Not even *you* could be stupid enough to mistake me for one of those bums. I thought you were on my side, Sam."

"I *am* on your side, Mike. I tell you I just got confused back there. I didn't mean to pull the triggers. It was all so sudden-like—"

"You know *damn well* who I was," the redhead told his passenger. "This time you're lucky. I'm not going to kill you myself or throw you back to Phil and his boys to do it for me. Just don't be fool enough to try it again, though. You already muffed the best chance you'll ever have. Next time I'll kill you for sure."

Happy Sam didn't answer.

They reached the main road, and Shayne turned his car north.

"Who's Bongo, Sam?" he asked suddenly.

It almost worked. Happy Sam opened his mouth to reply. Then he caught himself, barely in time, and cut off the words. Then, "I don't know nothing

about no Bongo. You sure you don't mean them drums?"

"I'm sure," Shayne said. "Are *you* sure you don't want to tell me?"

"I told you already. I don't know no Bongo. Why do you ask me such a silly sounding thing."

Shayne kept his peace for a minute or two and tooled his car through main road traffic. When he did reply it was nothing to give his passenger peace of mind.

"The reason I asked you about Bongo, Sam, was just I thought maybe you could tell me why they killed him."

Happy Sam called on the name of his deity.

"I think you'd better tell me, Sam," Shayne said inplacable. "It's in my mind that the people who wasted Bongo have you and Bill next on the menu. You wouldn't want that to happen—would you, Sam?"

"You got to *protect* me!" Happy Sam said. "You got me into this when you come busting into my place. You got to look after me."

"That was before you tried to put two ounces of number-six birdshot into my belly, Sam. Right now, I don't figure I owe you a bit." Shayne sounded sincere. "I figure it's the other way round. You owe me, and if you don't deliver, I don't really care if Phil and his merry men take you and put you in the same hole with Bongo."

"So I don't *really* know who Bongo is," Sam protested "Maybe I could guess, but the only one who really knows is Bill Wildon. Why don't you ask him?"

By this time they had come in sight of the barbecue stand to which Shayne had directed Connie and Wildon. They were just in time to see an old Ford turn out of the parking lot and head north. Wildon was at the wheel with Connie by his side. The car picked up speed, hampered only by the traffice.

Shayne had far and away the better car. He ran the others down inside of half a mile. Wildon looked angry, but he made no move to resist.

He made them get out of their car and leave it and get into the back seat of his Buick.

Only after they were back in traffic did he say to them, "I told you two to wait for me at the barbecue joint."

"Sure you did," Wildon said, "but I'm not working for you, Shayne. I don't see how you can start giving orders around here. Suppose you tell me that. What gives you the right to order us around."

"I'll tell you," Mike Shayne said. "The lot of you are in over your heads. Without my help,

you've had it, and don't kid yourselves about that."

"I still don't see. . . "

"There were three men waiting for you at the bar. One was Dandy Phil Aronzo and the other two were button men, ready to blow you apart.

"I don't know what you're mixed up in, Bill, but I do know Dandy Phil. He works for some real hard characters. You have something he wants—or his clients want—and he'll get it any way he can."

Wildon's face went red. He brushed the top of his head with the flat of his left hand. It was a gesture Shayne remembered from the old days. Usually it meant the flyer was getting ready for a fight.

"You hear me out, Mike," Wildon said. "What in the Earl of Hell's boot makes you think I'm afraid of the likes of Dandy Phil Aronzo? If I was afraid of him or his merry lads, I wouldn't have gone into this caper to begin with. They already had one try at me."

"So they did," Connie interjected. There was liking, maybe more, in the way she looked at the flyer. "They had once chance and almost made it stick. So what do you say to that?"

"I took a calculated risk," Wildon said, "and I won, didn't I?"

"You were lucky," Shayne said.

"Oh blow it through your hat," Wildon said. "You aren't the only A-one fighting man in Miami, Mike."

"The way I see it," Shayne said, "Phil and his boys have been one step ahead of you all the way. The only chance you've got now is to level with me. Think it over. You tell me you want out, and I'll pull over to the curb and let you out—and I won't come back. That's it!"

It was a bluff. Shayne wasn't forgetting his obligation to Melinda. He could tell by their faces that the others took him seriously, though.

V

IT WAS'T LONG before Bill Wildon made up his mind. "At least I know I can trust you, Mike," he said. "I guess we got no choice about that now. What do you want us to do?"

"The first thing we have to do is get under cover where Dandy Phil can't find us for a while," Shayne said. "After that, we can talk things over and see what we can figure out. I know an old apartment building on the outskirts of Lake Worth. The owner owes me from way back—and if he has a vacancy, he'll give me a key

and forget he ever saw us. It isn't the sort of place Dandy Phil would know about, anyway. We'll be safe enough there overnight."

The apartment was furnished comfortably. Shayne brought up a bottle of brandy from the trunk of his car and poured them each a drink. There was only a pitcher of cold water for chaser.

"Now," he said when they were all seated, "It's time I stopped guessing what this is all about and got a few of the nitty gritty facts. What in hell have you been up to, Bill."

"So far, I haven't been up to a damn thing," Wildon said, "except for trying to recover from a bullet wound."

"How come you got the wound?" Shayne asked. "Was Dandy Phil responsible for that?"

"Him or one of his boys I guess. They jumped me in Happy's place and chased me up the road and shot at me. I think I wounded at least one of them. In fact, I'm sure I did, because they took off and I got back to Sam's. The rest you know."

"I wish I did."

"What do you mean by that?" Wildon stood up He was lightly boned and without an ounce of fat anywhere on his body. He wore his forty years so well that people mistook him for Melinda's brother rather than her father. He carried himself with the easy swagger learned in his years as a fighter pilot with the Air Force.

Shayne looked him over, said "Why don't you stop lying to me, Bill? You know and I know that isn't even the beginning of this mess you're in.

"I don't know what you want to know," Wildon said, "but that's all I have to tell you. I took a calculated risk. Go on back and tell Melinda I'm okay and I'll be home in a few days. I left her enough money to get by on. You just tell her not to worry."

Mike Shayne decided to take a new tack. "Bongo's dead, Bill."

He could see the news jolted the lanky pilot. Wildon spun around. "What the hell do you know about Bongo? Who's Bongo?"

"Oh, the hell with it," Mike Shayne said. "You know who Bongo is. So does Dandy Phil Aronzo. Bongo was in this right up to his neck. So why leave me to guess?"

"Because it's none of your business," Wildon said.

"To my thinking it is, Bill," Mike Shayne said. "At least, right now Dandy Phil and his lads are gunning for me just as much as they are for you. So

I'm going to spell it out the way I see it.

"First, you show up with money running out of your ears. Somebody paid you that money—and it's so much he had to pay you for doing something either dangerous or illegal or both. Am I right?"

"Suit yourself," Wildon said. "You're doing the talking—not me."

"You're a flier," Shayne continued, "so it had to be concerned with flying. What I figure is it was flying something into the country. You could reach the Islands and back easy enough in the plane Palm Beach said was waiting for you. You could come in hedgehopping under the radar screen and put down at any of a thousand out-of-the-way places.

"To do all that, though, you had to have a contact at the other end. That would be Bongo. It's the sort of name or nickname you'd find in the Islands.

"Okay—so Dandy Phil and whoever is behind him want to highjack the load. They figure to wipe you out on this end—and they do. At least, they would you so you're out of the caper temporarily. For the moment, that's as good as killing you as far as they're concerned."

"How do you figure that?" This time it Was Happy Sam who asked.

"Easy." Shayne said. "They pick up the plane that was waiting for Bill and fly it over. Their pilot claims to be Bill and makes the contact with Bongo. So far, so good.

"Then something goes wrong. Either Bongo knows Bill, or he gets the wind up for some other reason. There's a fight, and this time they don't wound—they kill. Then something else goes wrong. Without Bongo's okay, they can't pick up whatever the payload is."

"I see," Connie said. "That's why they suddenly get interested in Bill again. If they had what they wanted, they could have afforded to forget all about him. The fact Dandy Phil came back for him must mean that they failed to get it."

"Exactly the way I figure it," Shayne said. He was beginning to develop a healthy respect for the girl's intelligence. "They wouldn't come back just to clean up loose ends. It has to be because Bill has something they really need.

"What is it, Bill?"

"Go ahead and tell me that, too," Bill Wildon said. "You've been doing all the talking so far—so go right ahead and finish it."

"How close am I to the mark?" Shayne persisted.

"You might as well tell him," Connie urged. "We could get killed except for Mr. Shayne. He's entitled."

"Sure he is." Happy Sam seconded his daughter. "That Phil and his lot are too big for us to handle alone."

"So what?"

"So if I don't get the trugh out of you, I'm going down to the pay phone in the lobby and call the police. There's a missing persons paper out on you, Bill. You want me to tell them where you are?"

"No," Wildon said. "I don't."

"Then tell me what I need to know."

"You already know most of it," Wildon admited. "I was supposed to pick up a payload in the Islands. My contact over there went by the code name of Bongo.

"I figure with you that Dandy Phil wanted to hijack the caper. At least, that's the only thing that's logical and I did a lot of thinking in that shack of Happy's. I figure, too, that with me wounded me out of it, it's the last I'll see of them. I figure to lie low a few more days and then go on home. Only they don't seem to be through with me. Now you say Bongo's dead. It must be like you figured, Mike."

Shayne wasn't sure how much truth he had just been told. He didn't really think Wildon was lying—but he had an educated hunch he had only heard part of the truth.

"What were you supposed to pick up."

"I don't know, Mike. I swear I don't know, and to tell you the truth I don't want to know. In this sort of a deal, the less I know the better. If I did know, I wouldn't want to say."

"Okay then—who hired you?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know that, either. It was done through a middle man—an opposite number to Dandy Phil."

It was all Shayne could get him to say just then.

It was enough to give the big readhead something to go on though. He was willing to believe his friend hadn't gotten himself involved in the dope traffic.

The happy-go-lucky flier had never had too much respect for the law as Law. He had cut corners often. Smuggling in itself would be no crime to him—but smuggling of dope would be.

So what did *that* leave?

Whatever he could fly in a small private plane would have to be both light and easy to move—and very valuable indeed. It might be jewelry—either cut or uncut stones. It might be some person of impor-

tance who could not come into the country through normal channels. It might be a stolen work of art worth millions in the grey world of collectors.

Another thing puzzled the detective. When Wildon failed to make his strip ahd his contact was killed, that should have concluded the whole caper. It hadn't. To Shayne, that didn't ring true.

VI

THEY SPENT THE NIGHT in the apartment. Between the four of them, they finished the bottle of brandy. It wasn't enough to get any of of them high, but it served to pass the time.

When the others had gone to sleep Mike Shayne sat in an easy chair by the window and did some thingking. He realized there was a lot more that he needed to know. He believed Bill Wildon when he said he had been hired to bring a cargo into the country. So far so good.

But from there on, there were holes in the pilot's story. It was logical that, after the first shooting at Happy Sam's bar, Dandy Phil and his crowd would take the plane and fly to the Islands. It wasn't logical that they kill the contact called Bongo unless they hadn't succeeded in getting whatever it was they had gone for. That had to tie in with the second attack on Wildon.

As Shayne figured it, the only reason for that would be if Wildon was in some way necessary to getting the cargo. Maybe he had a password or a code or key of some sort. Lacking that, Bongo had resisted the men who came for the cargo—and gotten himself gunned down as a result.

That figured up to a point, but only up to a point. With Bongo dead, who would deliver the cargo even if they got the password from Wildon? Did somebody else take Bongo's place out in the islands?

It didn't seem logical that anyone would—but unless it were so, why go after Wildon again? None of it quite fitted. There were missing parts and

Shayne knew he had to get them from Wildon.

Where did Happy Sam and Connie fit in? They claimed to be friends of Wildon, but Happy Sam had come very close to killing Shayne on two separate occasions back at the bar. Had he thought he was helping Wildon then—or been working for Dandy Phil Aronzo—or even playing a lone hand?

How much did Sam and Connie know about the mysterious cargo Wildon had been hired to carry?

After a while, Shayne forced himself to blank the questions out of his mind and go to sleep. Even his iron frame was weary, and he knew that he needed rest before the new day dawned.

He slept for some hours in the chair by the window. When he finally did awake, it was nearly five o'clock and beginning to get light outside. He could hear Bill Wildon and Happy Sam snoring in one of the two bedrooms.

Connie had used the other bedroom but she was up and sitting on the couch in the living room. She had put on her clothes and makeup. She looked prettier and a lot less tough than she had in the hard sunlight of the previous afternoon.

When she noticed that Shayne was awake, she said softly, "What are you going to do now, Mike?"

"Make an educated guess," he said and smiled at her in return.

"If I was you, I'd keep digging for the truth," she said. "Bill's too good a man to see wasted."

Shayne got up and stretched and then sat down again in the chair, said, "How much can you help me with that?"

"I'm afraid not much," she said. "I wish I could. Honestly, I don't really know much. Pop and Bill had a lot of talks out in that shack in the brush. They made some sort of deal. I'm not sure what it is, but Bill needed Pop's help and he agreed to cut him in on whatever this is all about."

"Can your Pop fly a plane?"

"No he can't. If you think he was the one who took the plane off the Palm Beach airport, you're dead wrong. I don't think Bill really cared about that plane anyhow. For some reason that isn't important to them."

"Why are you telling me this?" Shayne asked.

"I'm afraid," she said, "and that's God's truth. I think Pop and Bill are going to try and shake you and go after whatever the jackpot is. I love Pop, and I like Bill. Without you, I think the other crowd will knock them down like doves on

opening day. I don't want that to happen just because they're greedy."

Shayne nodded. He took one of the business cards out of his wallet and gave it to her.

"If they slip me and take you with them, keep in touch by calling my girl, Lucy Hamilton, at this number. I'm going to call her in a little while and I'll tell her about you. Now—do you have any idea at all what this thing is they're all after? Is it dope of any sort?"

"I'm pretty sure it isn't. Pop never used or sold. He kept me off it. I don't think Bill would get into that sort of rotten mess, either."

"Neither do I," Shayne said. "He isn't the sort. Also, I don't think Dandy Phil would dare hijack dope. The people who bring in big shipments are *really* rough. They'd wipe out him and his crowd like erasing a blackboard. I think it has to be something else. It has to be something worth a lot of money. You try to find out for me."

"I'll try."

"See if you can remember anything either of them said that could give you a clue. Anything at all. . ."

"I said I'd try."

"Okay now. I'm going out for a while. There's a twenty-four-hour convenience store up at the corner. I have to make a phone call and I'll pick up the makings for breakfast. You take care they don't wake up and run for it while I'm gone. If they start to take off, come get me."

"They won't get far as long as you have the car keys."

"I had that in mind," Shayne said.

He went on down to the convenience store on the corner and bought eggs, rolls, bacon, coffee, sugar and cream. It would give the four of them a hearty breakfast. He figured they'd need one before the day ahead.

There was a pay phone in the store and, despite the early hour, he decided to call Lucy Hamilton at her apartment. Better to wake her up, he thought, than risk staying out of touch any longer.

"Thank God you called," she said when she answered the phone. "I've been going half out of my mind wondering how to get in touch with you."

"What's the matter?"

"Somebody has kidnapped the Wildon girl," she said. "I had a call late last night. He said you'd know who he was. He said he had Wildon's girl and wouldn't give her up till Wildon brought him what he wanted."

Shayne felt an icy knot at the pit of his stomach. They should

have picked up Melinda the night before, but he had been afraid it might lead Dandy Phil to the Wildon home. Apparently that hadn't been necessary.

"He wasn't bluffing, Michael," Lucy assured him. "I went to the Wildon house. Nobody was home. I waited around awhile and I've called on the phone every couple of hours since. I'm sure Melinda would have answered if she'd been home. Who has her, Michael? And how can you get her back if you don't know where her father is?"

"You can stop worrying about that part," the detective said. He went on to tell her all that had happened since he left his office the previous day.

"It's Dandy Phil Aronzo or somebody working for him who has the girl," Shayne finished. "It has to be. Don't worry. I have Wildon. We'll get this straightened out. Did he leave any instructions?"

"He said to go back to Happy Sam's bar and bring what he wanted. He'd call you there and tell you how to get the Wildon girl back. He said sooner or later he knew you'd call me and that was what I should tell you. I didn't understand then but I do now. What should I tell him if he calls again?"

"Just tell him I've got his message and I'll meet him at the bar. Don't say anything about Wildon or anything else I've told you. I think he believes I have Wildon, but he can't be sure. The less he knows right now, the better."

"Okay. I'll do just as you say—but please be careful and get the girl back. She's a nice kid."

"You know I'll do my best, Angel," Shayne said. "I'll keep in touch."

He hung up and went back to the apartment to wake the others. This time Bill Wildon didn't give him any argument.

"Anything we have to do to get the girl back," he said. "You know that, Mike. I don't put anything in the world above that kid. Since her mother died, she's the only thing on earth I've really got."

"Okay then," Shayne said. "What *is* this thing Phil wants. Better turn it over to me now, Bill."

"I would if I could, but I don't have it with me," Wildon said.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. I'm not damned fool enough to carry a thing like that on me."

"Where can we get it then?"

"It's in that fool car I was driving"

"Oh, my God!" Happy Sam said. "It's been right under our

noses for the past two weeks. If I'd only known. . . ."

Connie said, "Shut up, Pop."

"No," Shayne said. "*Don't* shut up, Pop. You go right on and sing like a canary, Pop. I think it's time we all found out whose side you're on. First, I thought you were with Bill. Then, when you tried to shoot me outside the bar, I began to wonder."

"Now *I* want to know myself," Wildon said. "And what's this about trying to shoot Mike."

"We ain't working for *nobody,*" Happy Sam protested. "You know we just got mixed up in this from trying to help an old friend. *You* know that."

"Sure," Connie said. "You're just the kind to risk your neck for an old friend you ain't seen in ten years. He ain't going to believe you, Pop."

"I don't believe him, Connie," Shayne said. "All I know for sure is one of you'd better start telling the truth. Right now, we don't need you. I could twist Happy's arm off if that's what it's going to take. I could wring his neck for that matter. What do I care? I don't take kindly to somebody who tried to put two loads of birdshot into my belly."

He paused.

"He means it, Pop," Connie said.

"Everybody found Bill at my place," Happy Sam said finally. "First, there were Phil's two boys, who had the gun fight and wounded him. Then you traced him that far, Shayne I don't know how you did it, but you did. There was another one before you, though."

"Tell me," Mike Shayne said.

"This one came only a couple of days after we hid Bill out at the shack," Happy Sam continued. "He was looking for Bill. We told him Bill had been there and about the gunfight but not that Bill had come back. He listened to what I had to say, then he went away."

"He came back, though," Connie said. "A couple of days later, he came back in the afternoon. He showed us a gun and said he'd kill us if we didn't do as he said."

"He meant it," Happy Sam put in. "That one really *meant* it. My spine crawls when I think of him. He was real easy and soft spoken, but he meant it. That man was tougher than a hundred-fifty Dandy Phils.

"He said he couldn't trace Bill Wildon past my place. He said if Bill came back or we knew where he was, we was to call him at a number he gave me. Otherwise, he'd kill us."

"What's that phone number?" Mike Shayne demanded.

"I don't know. It's pasted to the underside of the bar by the

cash register. I don't remember it. He said we wasn't to let anybody get to Bill before him."

"That's why I didn't want Bill to wait for you at the barbecue joint," Connie explained. "He didn't want to wait anyway. He didn't want you on his back. Shayne."

"That explains a couple to things—but not one big one," Shayne said. "Why didn't you just send this man out to the shack where you knew Bill was? Was it because he didn't offer to pay you—just threatened? Why?"

Happy Sam said, "That was partly it—and partly Bill was my friend and this other guy wasn't. We had nothing to gain by selling out Bill. Better just let him run and claim he'd never been there before."

Connie was more honest.

"Bill had already promised to cut us in on whatever he stood to gain. We figured, if he needed us and we helped him there'd be big bread in it for us. It had to be big if all these guys were willing to kill for it one way or the other."

"Yes, it has to be big," Mike Shayne said. "What is it, Bill. I think it's time you told us, seeing the way things are going."

Wildon ignored that. Shayne prodded him further. "You have to tell us, Bill. It's your kid's safety that's at stake."

"I don't have to tell you a thing," Wildon insisted. "The less you know, the better for all of you, anyway. The game's up. They can have what they want for Melinda. One thing I have to know though, Connie. This other guy who came to see you—what color was he wearing?"

"Grey," said Connie. "Grey suit—grey shirt—grey tie—even grey suede shoes. His eyes were grey and so was his hair. I could almost swear he had grey skin except that couldn't be possible."

"What does that tell you, Bill?" Shayne asked.

"Just what she says," Wildon said. "He was a grey man. Stop asking me questions. I'm going to let them have what they want."

Shayne was sure there was more to it than that. Wildon had expected Connie or Happy Sam to describe a man in grey or he never would have asked the question. The color had significance for him. Wildon wasn't going to talk, thought, and Shayne didn't understand that.

He was afraid it meant Wildon still had a plan to double-cross both Dandy Phil and the man in grey and keep the prize they were all after.

"Have you got what they want on you?" he asked Wildon.

"I'm not *that* much of a fool," the other said. "We have to go back to my car first."

That was all he would say. Shayne had to be content for the time being while Connie cooked them a big breakfast on the apartment range. They all ate heartily except Bill Wildon. The news about Melinda had obviously shaken the pilot. Until now, his attitude had been a mixture of the defiant and the defensive. He had obviously not been about to cooperate with the detective.

But he was changing. There was still desperation in his mood, but it was of a different sort. There was suppressed fury against the people who had taken his child, plus a resolve to get her back.

To this point, Shayne had felt that Wildon still hoped to pull off the sort of coup he had previously talked about with Happy Sam and Connie, if he could manage to shake off the presence of the detective. Now the flier was no longer the scheming adventurer. Greed did not weigh at all in the scales against love for his daughter.

It made the man a lot more human.

VII

ONCE THEY HAD EATEN breakfast Mike Shayne decided they had

better get along to where Happy Sam had hidden Bill Wildon's car in a patch of brush near the bar. It was a short drive and still early enough so that commuter traffic hadn't yet built up on the roads. The air was still cool and pleasant.

"Why on earth did you buy a car like that, anyway, Bill?" Shayne asked "Didn't you know it would mark you so you'd leave a trail?"

"Sure I knew it," Wildon said. "*I* didn't buy that car. It was loaned to me for this trip. I don't even know who's name the title is in. I like the wheels all right, but I'd never use any-

thing that flashy on a job if it was my choice. It'd be like trying to hide your trail by driving a fire engine. I didn't *have* any choice, though."

"The car belongs to the man who hired you?"

"I don't really know who it belongs to," Wildon said. "All I know is, it came from him with orders to use it. So I used it."

"Didn't it occur to you you were deliberately being set up so Dandy Phil could keep track of you?"

"More likely, so the *boss* could keep track of me," Wildon answered. Then he seemed to realize he might have said too much, added, "Anyway that doesn't matter now. I want my kid."

Shayne thought if Wildon's mysterious boss mistrusted the flier, he might want to keep track of him every step of the way—particularly after Wildon had flown the plane back into the country with whatever he was sent to pick up. That would assume that Wildon would put the plane down at Palm Beach Airport on the return trip, because it would be where he had left the car parked.

That didn't make much sense, though. If Wildon had a planeload of contraband, he'd have to put it down at one of the smuggler's landing strips which pockmarked the State, instead of at a regular port of entry complete with customs men.

The more Shayne thought of the whole deal, the more mysterious it became. There was something wrong with his assumptions—something he had missed or was looking at from the wrong angle. Until he found that missing link, he wasn't going to be able to solve the case.

He resolved to concentrate on seeing that Melinda Wildon was recovered from Dandy Phil. At this point, the big readhead was a lot more concerned with what happened to the girl than with her father. Bill had been so totally uncooperative that Mike Shayne was disgusted. He didn't trust Happy Sam or Connie any longer, and he didn't really trust the pilot, either.

He was beginning to understand the problems of the fabled "man who rides a tiger" in the old Chinese proverb.

They were able to get to the brush field where Wildon's car had been left without passing Happy Sam's bar. A narrow dirt track coming in from the west took them to within a couple of hundred yards. They walked the rest of the way through sawgrass, thorny brush and meleleuca tree saplings.

When they reached the car, it

was still in good condition after two weeks in the brush. There were the muddy pawprints of an inquisitive raccoon on the hood and the gold vinyl top, but that was all. Fortunately, the car had been left in thick brush, where not even Dandy Phil's helicopter could detect it from overhead.

Shayne was surprised when they got to the car. He had expected the flyer to unlock the car and recover a locker key, a card, a letter or something of the sort from a secret hiding place. This would be the sign for which Dandy Phil had had to kill a man called Bongo somewhere in the islands.

Instead, Wildon went directly to the trunk of the car and unlocked it. There was nothing inside but an overnight bag with the initials W.W., a jack and handle, and a spare tire.

Shayne wondered why Wildon hadn't sent Happy Sam to bring the overnight bag out to him in the shack. Was it because the mysterious "key" was in the bag and he was afraid Happy or Connie would find it?

Wildon tossed the bag on the ground, though, and then lifted out the spare tire. Again Shayne expected him to look inside for a letter or small object. He didn't.

There was something else peculiar. The car was brand new, still dealer-shiny. Everything but the spare tire.

It was a recap. On top of that, it was too small to fit that particular car.

Wildon picked up bag and tire and said, "Let's get on with it, Shayne."

"That's *all*?" Shayne asked.

"That's all! We can go over to the bar now and wait to make a deal for Melinda."

When they got back to the car, Wildon put his bag and tire in the back seat and got in front with Shayne. Happy Sam and Connie, who had been trailing along without saying a word, got in the back seat with the spare tire.

Shayne took the long way round to Happy Sam's. He would like to have had one of the others cut through the brush to the back of the bar, but after what had happened the day before he didn't trust any one of them. He didn't want them prowling around loose at his back.

There was some danger in staying together in case Dandy Phil had an ambush in the bar, but it was better than having one of his motley crew loose on his own.

In the event, this early in the morning, there was no one around the buildings when they drove up.

They got out of the car, and

Shayne noted that Wildon left his bag and the spare tire in the back seat.

There was still a night light burning over the front door top the bar. When Shayne tried the front door it was locked. Happy Sam opened it and the four of them went in.

Dandy Phil Aronzo was there ahead of them. He was seated at one of the tables near the front windows, sprawled forward face down on the table. There was a gaping hole in the back of his skull where a high-powered bullet had made its exit.

The natty little attorney had been shot once through the forehead.

Shayne was no coroner of course, but from the look and feel of the body and the drying blood he estimated that the killing had taken place less than an hour before.

There was a note under the outstretched hand of the dead man on the table top. It was typed on the machine in Happy Sam's office on a sheet of the bar owner's own notepaper. The message was short and to the point.

Wildon–we want the babies back home. Bring them in or you'll get what this one got.

There was no mention of Melinda or of terms for her return.

Shayne looked through the dead attorney's pockets. Apparently they hadn't even been searched. His wallet and other personal effects were still there.

"Somebody just walked in here and wasted this character," Shayne said. "He didn't want his money or anything else except to kill him. You got any idea who might do a thing like that, Bill?"

Wildon failed to answer the question.

"I'll tell you, then," Shayne went on. "It has to be your friend in the grey suit, the man who works for your boss. Now what about these "babies" they want you to bring in?"

"I can't tell you. Besides I want my kid back first."

"Tell him, Bill," Connie said, "and while you're at it you better tell us too. This game is getting too rough to fool around with anymore in the dark. Either you tell us right now or we want out."

"It's too late for out," Wildon said. "He'll kill you like he did Dandy Phil there. He doesn't care who he kills. Believe me—the less you know, the better from now on."

The phone in the office rang. Happy Sam started to answer it, but Shayne waved him away and picked it up himself.

A voice at the other end said, "Phil?"

Shayne grunted an assent.

"You better get in here fast, Phil. This place is staked out, so you better come the back way by boat. I don't know who it is, but there oughtn't be nobody there."

Shayne said, "Okay, I'm coming." He tried to sound like the dead lawyer.

The voice said, "What's the matter with you? Say, is this Phil?"

"Yeah."

"Well get a move on. If these characters try coming in, we'll fight. What do we do with the little broad then? Waste her?"

"Hell, no!" Shayne said. "Keep her alive so we can trade."

He hung up and cut the connection then before the other could ask any more questions. Then he turned to the others.

"Come on. There's a place in North Miami I know where we can rent a boat. There isn't any time to waste."

"What in hell do we want with a boat?"

Shayne leafed through the dead man's wallet. "See the address? He lives on the beach with bay frontage and a boat slip. According to the guy on the other end of that phone, that's where they have Melinda. We're going to get her."

"Fine with me," Wildon said. "Tough for them."

"Not with *us*," Happy Sam said. Why do *we* have to go?"

"You have to go because you're already in this too deep to back out. Don't fool yourselves that I don't know how deep that is, either, because I do."

"But I don't see—"

"Let's put it *this* way then," the big man spoke with authority. "You're going along because I say you are."

That ended the argument.

They went back out to the car. Shayne checked to see that the spare tire from Wildon's car was still in the back seat. He was beginning to get a glimmer of what had to be the truth.

"What are we going to do about the stiff in the bar there?" Happy Sam asked.

"Just leave him there," Shayne directed. "The first one to come along will find him. Sooner or later, somebody will call the police. When this is over, you can explain him any way you like."

Happy Sam didn't like. He moaned at the thought.

"Let's get the show on the road," Shayne said. "Pile in."

The detective had the bit in his teeth now. He thought he had the answer to the whole bloody puzzle now. It was full speed ahead and damn the torpedos to get things cleared up.

It was about an hour's drive south on U.S. One to the small fishing marina owned and managed by an old friend of Mike Shayne. He rented a twenty-four foot outboard boat. About ten feet of the bow was decked over, the rest open. There were twin high-powered outboard engines.

"It'll take us another hour to get to the dock at the late Dandy Phil's Miami Beach house," the readhead told the others.

"Then what?" Wildon asked sharply.

"Then we take your daughter home," was all that Shayne would say in answer.

VIII

UPPER BISCAYNE BAY was flat calm that morning and there were only a few boats out. Once they got within a mile of the Aronzo landing, Shayne, who was at the helm, cut back the motors steered close to the shoreline. He made the other three get down under the foredecking so they were out of sight. He looked like a solitary fisherman heading home after a night of sport.

That was the way he wanted to look.

Dandy Phil's people would be watching for a boat coming fast and in a straight line from the north. They would surely know the lawyer's pleasure boat by sight and be watching for its familiar lines. Also, their attention would be on the people they knew had the house staked out from the land side.

In the event everything worked out as planned. He came coasting along, just a few feet from the sea walls which banded the lawns of the big houses in this afluent section.

There was one man on the dock of Dandy Phil's estate. He gave the approaching boat only a casual glance, then resumed his watch of the open waters of Biscayne Bay.

Shayne brought his boat in close, He cut the engines and was within ten feet of the dock before the sentry really noticed him. The man looked at him in genuine surprise. He stared right into the muzzle of Mike Shayne's big, black Colt .45 automatic pistol.

"Just don't do anything sudden," the big man said. "Take the painter off the bow and tie us up all nice and secure. I won't shoot you unless you absolutely make me."

His air of calm authority precluded any argument on the sentry's part. The man did as he was told and made the boat fast. His eyes almost popped out when Shayne motioned the other three out from under the

decking and they climbed up on the dock.

"Anybody watching this dock from the house?" Shayne asked.

"No, they're watching the front of the place."

"How many are there beside you?"

"Just two—and the cook. She don't count."

"Where's the girl you took last night?"

"She's tied up on a bed on the second floor." The man saw the way Shayne was watching him, hastily added, "She ain't hurt none, Mister. Dandy Phil was careful about that. None of us was to bother her. She ain't even tied so it would hurt. I'm telling you the truth."

"I know," Shayne said. "That's why her father wasn't more worried. He knew what a nice considerate man Phil was."

"What the hell do you mean by that," Wildon demanded.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," Shayne said. "This whole shenanigan is wide open, Bill. Now all of you get on up to the house, and be sure to lug that spare tire with you."

"What did you mean Phil *was* a nice guy?" It was the sentry who asked.

"Phil's dead," Happy Sam said. "We found him shot dead, early this morning."

Shayne saw the expression on the man's face, said, "That's right. The boys out in front of this place right now are probably fixing to do the same to you."

"How do you know that?" said Happy Sam.

"You just figure you're all lucky I *do* know it," Shayne said. "I think you and Bill and Connie are on their list too."

"Who are *they*?"

"Ask Bill. He knows."

Wildon said nothing.

They went on up to the house and in the kitchen door. A motherly colored cook was working at the stove and one of Phil's gunsels was pouring himself a cup of coffee.

He made the mistake of going for the gun in his shoulder holster. Shayne was across the room and pistol-whipping him before he got his hand on the weapon.

The cook started to scream, but thought better of it when she saw the expression on the detective's face.

"Nobody's going to hurt you," Shayne told her. "You just go along with what you're doing. Where's the other man?"

She couldn't talk, just pointed towards the front of the house.

Shayne found the third hood looking out the front window of the house. He had a machine-pistol cradled in his arms—and if Shayne hadn't been as fast and as silent as a stalking

jungle cat, he could have put up a terrific fight.

As it was, the gun was twisted out of his grasp and he was looking into the muzzle of Shayne's .45 before he knew what had hit him.

Connie and Bill Wildon ran up the stairs. Within minutes, they had found and untied Melinda Wildon

Shayne and Happy Sam tied up the three hoods with electric cord and clothesline from the kitchen and sat them in a row on the big living room couch. He didn't try to gag them, though—just tied their wrists and ankles.

By that time, Melinda had come down the stairs. She ran over and grabbed Shayne and kissed him. "I knew I could trust you. You found Daddy and then you came and rescued me."

"Thanks honey," Mike Shayne said. "I'm sorry this isn't over yet."

"MY GOODNESS—what do you mean by that?"

"There's still the people outside this house," Mike Shayne said. "They haven't gone away yet."

As if to put a period to his sentence, the telephone in the living room began to ring. Shayne picked it up and said, "Hello?"

The voice on the wire was a man's. It was an educated voice, calm and so sure of itself as to instantly put the detective on the alert.

"This is Mike Shayne, isn't it?" the voice said.

"This is Shayne."

"Just so you don't underrate us, Shayne, we have a boat out in the Bay, too. We saw your landing just now. I'm calling from a phone in a car just down the street."

"Okay."

"I'm sure you have rescued the young lady by now, Shayne. We aren't interested in her."

"What do you want?" Shayne asked.

"We want something you have in there. We want it and we can get it. You can't get past us—and after dark we can bring up enough men to get in."

"At least you can try."

"Believe me, Mr. Shayne, we can do anything I say that we can. Please believe me."

"I've got a proposition," Shayne said.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I think I know what you want and I don't have any reason to keep you from getting it. Suppose you come in—all by yourself—and we'll talk things over. Just come up the front walk alone. You sound like a reasonable man."

"So do you," said the voice. "Give me a minute to tell my

associates what this is all about."

The line went dead.

"What are you doing?" Wildon demanded. "You've got to be crazy. We have Melinda. Let's get out of here."

"If you don't do it my way," Shayne said, "some of us are going to be very dead. You try and block me now, and he can have you. All except Melinda that is—and he doesn't want her."

They didn't like it but they had no choice.

IX

THE MAN WHO came walking up the path to the front door of the house was the man in grey they had told Shayne about. His clothes were grey, as were his hair and skin and eyes.

If this man has a soul, Mike Shayne thought, *it's probably a frozen grey too.*

They met at the front door and Shayne led him in. He looked at the others assembled there with the shade of a smile on his thin grey lips.

"I think we can make a deal," Shayne said.

"What sort of a deal?"

"The simplest deal in the world," Shayne said. "We each get the thing we really want, and we get it without any more fighting. I don't kill any of your people—and you don't kill anybody in revenge."

"Suppose you explain how we can manage that," the grey man said.

"Melinda Wildon hired me to find her father. She's the only one I've been working for. At first, this whole case was a mystery to me. It didn't make sense. The deeper in I got the less sense it made. That is—until I suddenly realized where I was going wrong. After that everything fell right in line."

"Just what point was that?" Melinda Wildon asked.

"That's simple, honey," Shayne said. "At first I thought like you that Bill was hired to smuggle something *into* the

country. Nothing fitted that way"

"Actaully, he was hired to take something out of the country. That makes all the difference.

"What he was taking belongs to this man or his employer. It was so valuable that Dandy Phil learned of it and tried to hijack it. He failed.

"You see," Shayne continued, "Phil made the same mistake I did. He knew a little more—he knew what was being moved and that it was worth at least a million dollars. But he made the same mistake. He thought the stuff was coming into the country when it was really going out.

"He jumped Bill at Happy Sam's and wounded him. It wasn't important to kill Bill at that point—just to keep him from picking up the plane. Phil and his boys did that. They took the plane to Bill's contact man, Bongo, and demanded the goods. Bongo couldn't deliver because he didn't have the stuff. He got killed—but not before Phil learned he had to go back and get you, Bill, because you had the stuff still in Florida. Isn't that right?"

"Something like that," Wildon admitted.

"Yeah," Shayne said, "and here's something more. By that time you'd been sitting around that shack, nursing your wound and drinking the booze Connie brought out to you. Either you or she got a bright idea. It doesn't matter which.

"What does matter was the idea. You still had the loot. You were missing and so was the plane. You had a good guess what happened in the Islands. Why not keep the stuff and stay lost? Wasn't that it?"

"Daddy," Melinda said. "You *wouldn't!* You wouldn't?" She didn't sound very sure.

Wildon kept his mouth shut tight.

"Sure he would," Shayne said. "It was temptation with a capital T. Then *I* showed up. Then Phil showed up again. Then this other man came back from his boss. It got too hot to handle. It was then that Phil kidnapped you. He knew Bill would do anything on earth to get you back—*Anything!*"

"Of course, I would, baby," Wildon said. He meant it.

"What happens now?" asked the grey man.

"Now I find out if I've been right," Shayne said.

The spare tire Bill Wildon had been carrying was on the floor of the living room. Shayne put it up on the table and took out the heavy bladed folding-hunter clasp knife he carried. He slashed the tire to let out the air and then used his pow-

erful hands to pry it off the rim.

Then he felt the recap over carefully till he found what he was looking for. He cut out a section of the spare about ten inches long and slashed into it with his big knife. Inside the tire—between the original fabric and the rubber recap—was a long flat cloth pouch.

Shayne cut the pouch and poured out upon the table top a handful of magnificent, flashing, blue-white cut diamonds.

"This is what you want," he said to the man in grey.

"That belongs to my employer," the other said.

"I don't know who you work for," Shayne said. "I know you won't tell. I don't know why you want to smuggle these out of the country, though I can guess.

"I'm offering you a simple deal. You take your property. I couldn't hold it for the law if I wanted. Until it's actaully smuggled out, it isn't contraband. You take it and go.

"In your turn you never touch any of these people again."

"Suppose I refuse?" the grey man said. "We aren't used to letting people doublecross us. What then."

"Then you don't get out of here unless you kill me first," Shayne said. "Besides, they didn't make the doublecross stick."

The other looked at Shayne. There was death in his eyes.

"You'd better deal while we're both still ahead," Shayne said. "You'd better be thankful nobody tries to pin the shooting of Dandy Phil on you. I guess you had somebody else pull the trigger—but who knows? Let the police handle that one."

"I don't like it."

"I don't really care if you do," the big man told him. "These people have had their lesson. They won't try to cross you again. You've got what you want, and I've got all I really want."

"I still don't like it."

"Then go for your gun."

It was a clash of wills between two strong and determined and very deadly men. For a long moment their eyes and their wills locked. It was the man in grey who broke.

"Okay Shayne, I've nothing to prove by trying to take you. Besides it could be a draw, and then my boss would have to send somebody else for his ice. That somebody would kill you all for sure, and the young lady is too nice for that."

He took a cloth bag out of his pocket and began putting the diamonds into it. Shayne knew that they had all been close to death. He knew he had won.

A TIME TO KILL

Life was serene, even dull, for Job Roberts. Up to a point—up to the time Jan came into his life, naked and gleaming, fresh from her swim. She was perfect, sweet, a child with a bloody knife in her hand . . .

by TALMAGE POWELL

LOCATED in the South Carolina lowlands, Farley City lay in a near coma from the late summer heat, a collection of squalid, weather-beaten buildings strung along a dusty Main street. The searing sky was cloudless, marked only by gray worms of smoke crawling from the stacks of nearby textile mills, from which Farley City drew its economic life.

At this stand-still late-afternoon hour most activity was centered in the Amusement Palace, best of the local taverns, where a few business men sipped beer and talked of politics, local scandals and cotton prices.

Job Roberts braked his two-year-old Eldorado behind a dusty pickup truck, and as he got out, he saw Doctor Samuel Conklin ambling along the sidewalk.

Doc Conklin called, "Got a minute, Job?" and Roberts waited on the sidewalk, lightweight sport jacket slung over his shoulder. Conklin was an ungraceful mass of movement in a tent-like, always-rumpled summer suit, wilted shirt, and floppy, old-fashioned panama hat. He looked about as competent as a huge, melting bonbon—until he was in the presence of a sick person. Then you knew the truth: Doctor Samuel Conklin was a rare medical talent who hated suffering and death with a personal passion.

"Hot," Doc Conklin grunted. "Come on. I'll buy you a beer."

Roberts suspected that something more than beer was on

An Unforgettable Novelet of Suspense

Doc's mind. They turned into the tavern a few doors down the block, and when they were seated and sipping, Doc Conklin said, "Lunched with the Lions today, Job. Subject of that tract of land came up, and we decided to take it. It'll make a first rate park and playground."

Conklin paused long enough to wash his throat with a long draft. "Few years back, kids around here needed a slingshot, fishing pole, hound dog, the open fields and streams. Not like that anymore, and you can say that again."

"Farley City's growing," Roberts agreed. "Like every place else."

"We couldn't swing a park over there, Job, without the cut rate price you put on that tract."

"The hell with that talk," Roberts grinned. "I'm tired of paying taxes on it."

"By the way, I saw Eversham Narris today."

"Thought he was up in North Carolina," Roberts said idly.

Doc Conklin noted the way Roberts was musing over his glass.

"Narris got back from Asheville yesterday," Conklin said. "He was looking for you."

"Was he?" Roberts said without real interest.

Conklin watched the younger man trace patterns in the moisture on his beer glass. Doc propped his elbows on the table. "What in hell's eating you?"

Roberts looked up. The slow, easy grin returned. It fitted his lean, pleasant, not-exactly-handsome face. He was twenty-seven years old, a lanky five-ten, wore his sandy hair cut moderately short, and didn't seem to mind that he had little, outwardly, to distinguish him.

"I don't know if I ought to tell you, Doc."

Conklin wriggled closer to the table's edge. "Secret ain't a secret unless somebody knows you've got it."

Roberts looked at the golden heat outside. "I saw something today, Doc. I really saw something." He seemed to be envisioning it all over again in the wash of light beyond the tall windows. "Doc . . . it was almost like she wasn't for real, coming up out of the water with the drops like diamonds on her nude body."

"Hmmm. Thought your generation was so blasé it never got addlepated from the sight of a naked woman."

"Naked woman . . ." Roberts murmured. "I guess so. But the phrase is out of key, it doesn't quite describe her."

"Where'd you see this undraped angel, nymph, ethereal sprite?"

"Two Mile Creek," the young man said. "I was over that way looking at some cotton. Thought I'd stop off at the sweetwater spring above the creek and kill the heat and dryness of my insides. The spot on Two Mile has always been a favorite of mine, with the trees and laurel hugging the banks and the cool, clear pool the creek makes there. And—she was there, Doc, playing in the pool with not another soul around. Just like she'd chanced on the pool and couldn't resist the temptation."

"Well, it's been a hot day. Who was she?"

"I don't know," Roberts said. "Never saw her before . . . I sneaked away before she knew I was there . . ."

"The hell you say!" Doc's brows crimped. "Son, you may need a physical."

Roberts didn't rise to the jest. "Tell the truth, I did go back later, Doc. Thought I'd just be happening along when she got dressed and came out of the glade—but she was gone."

"That ought to learn you," Conklin observed.

"No, Doc!" Roberts reacted quickly, almost angrily. "Don't read it like a line from a dirty book!"

Doc Conklin was affected by the vehemence of the young man's reaction. Roberts bit off his words, and there was a moment of awkward silence. Then Roberts grinned suddenly. "God to run, Doc. Thanks for the beer." He spoke as if the subject of the strange girl had never come up. "And we'll draw up the deed to that tract any time."

"See you later, Job."

The big, pink old man watched Roberts leave the tavern. A frown deepened on the huge, kindly face. Something had happened to Job Roberts today, and an unaccountable shiver chased across the old doctor's shoulders.

Job Roberts' office was on the second, and top, floor of an old brick building on the corner of Main and Trade Streets. From here he bought and sold cotton futures, leased acreage, and managed the modest commercial properties he owned, sites of an auto agency, a filling station, and a drive-in restaurant.

He'd inherited the integrity and respect that went with the Roberts name and a nest egg in property and cash. Life his father and his father's father, he was already discovering that he lacked the deviousness and merciless drive that marked the tycoon.

Roberts men always made it, up to a point. They lived and provided well; they afforded good schools for their children;

they found time to lend a hand in civic affairs. But Job Roberts knew he would never be rich. He just didn't have it in him, the egoism, the greed, the capacity to ruin another man for profit.

The stairs creaked from the dry heat as Roberts went up. Mrs. Wharton, who comprised his office staff, had gone home for the day. Roberts unlocked the door and entered.

The quarters were comfortable, two large air-conditioned offices furnished with old leader and walnut. Roberts had hardly entered his private office when he heard the arrival of someone in the outer office. He glanced up from his desk and saw Eversham Narris crossing the outer office with his quick stride.

"Hi, Job."

"Hello, Ev," Job said without enthusiasm. He got up and shook hands with Narris across the desk. Narris had a quick, wiry, strong grip. Not surprising, since he was a quick, wiry, strong man. Well into maturity, he was slender as a youth. His face was as leanly chiseled as Roberts'; the differences were in eyes and lips. Narris' slate-gray eyes had an impenetrable surface and his lips were thinly cold. His high, bony forehead was widow's peaked with reddish brown hair, carefully styled twice a month when Narris drove over to Columbia. His teeth flashed porcelain white in a smile that never, to the best of Roberts' recollection, had expressed real warmth.

"Thought you were in Asheville," Roberts said.

"Got back last night. Job, I want you to have dinner with us tonight."

Roberts let a moment pass. He'd never been bosom friends with Ev and Dolly Narris.

"Come on," Narris pressed. "You haven't any other plans for the evening?"

"No."

"Then it's settled. See you about seven-thirty. We'll have a drink and eat at eight. Strictly informal."

II

THE HOUSE was a rambling structure of glass and redwood fitted into the gentle contours of a rise in the land. It was approached by a spotless white driveway that wound through stately pines and lawns the velvet of a golf green.

As Job Roberts parked his car in the deepening twilight a pair of Dalmatians romped toward him with ungainly strides, prancing playfully about him as he spoke their names and walked to the front door.

A female servant admitted

him and said that Mr. Narris was in the den.

Roberts walked into the long room with its beamed ceiling and raised white brick fireplace. Narris was at the bar.

"Hi, Job. Martini?"

"Thanks."

They stood at the tooled leather bar, sipping. Narris smiled, eyes glinting. "Would you be sore, Job, if I admitted I had a reason for inviting you here tonight?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Roberts grinned. "I've been curious since you left my office this afternoon."

"You won't be sorry you came." Narris slapped him lightly on the shoulder, turned, and quickly went from the room.

He returned within a couple of minutes. He wasn't alone. He was holding the hand of the girl beside him, leading her quickly across the den to Roberts.

"I want you to meet my niece, Miss Jan Harkness," Narris said. "Jan, Mr. Job Roberts."

For a moment, the room was unsteady. Roberts hadn't missed the stress that Narris had put on the word "*Miss*" in the introduction. Neither did he miss the slightly wet quality of Narris's smile, as if Narris was thinking: "This ought to liven up the old town; Job, how do you like this piece?"

She was close to Roberts now, and he was very aware of her. She was wearing a white sheath dress, vivid contrast for the startling black of her hair and eyes. Her hair was feathery, not quite the head-hugging ringlets it had been this afternoon when wet by the clear water of Two Mile creek.

Roberts felt the touch of her cool, slender fingers as she offered her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Roberts?"

He almost blushed. "Fine," he managed, "just fine."

"Dinner's about ready," Ev Narris said, breaking the awkward pause.

But Dolly's late entrance delayed dinner. Her plumpness, swathed in yards or frilly silken foam, reminded Roberts of pink spongecake. She had large, blue, vacant eyes with blue shadows in the translucent skin underneath them. Her hair was a straw blonde, piled atop her head.

Dolly ate, too daintily, with mincing little gestures and complained of a range of subjects when they were all seated in the formal dining room. Narris gave Dolly the attentiveness that her fleshy fragility—and money—demanded. He'd practiced the faithful house pet act for so long that he could carry

it off mechanically, without effort or concentration, when he was stuck with Dolly's presence for any length of time.

But Dolly and Ev Narris faded to nothing in the presence of the girl beside Roberts. Later, the small talk, the drinks, the game of bridge following dinner all seemed unreal. There'd been numerous girls for Roberts and a couple of serious affairs, but nothing like this. Looking at her, touching her, hearing her voice, seeing the quickly hidden nuance in the depths of her long-lashed, sooty eyes . . . everyone who had come before her was pallid, hardly worth the effort of memory.

Roberts was restless when he got home, to his six-room brick split level in Morningside, the comfortable residential neighborhood near Farley's eastern city limits. His housekeeper, who came in each day kept the place in homy comfort, but tonight it felt barren, uninviting.

Roberts readied for bed and tried to read. He gave it up when he had to re-read pages to get their gist. He dropped the book on the bedside table, stirring uncomfortably on the mattress and pillow until he came to rest finally with his hands locked behind his head, his eyes staring at the ceiling, his mind filled with thoughts of the girl and Narris and Dolly.

Narris . . . he'd come to Farley City about fifteen years ago from a North Carolina textile complex, taking a minor executive position in the Farley City mills. In due time Narris might have risen to a senior vice-presidency and board membership. He knew textiles. He had cunning and the killer instinct. And he could undermine and destroy the man who blocked the next step higher without a qualm.

But for Narris there'd seemed to be a faster, easier, more certain means to the material goals he coveted. One day Dolly would inherit controlling interest in all of it, the vast brick complex housing miles of machinery, the railroad sidings and fleets of company owned tractor-trailers rolling loaded from the mills every day, the private airstrip where men with attache cases and the look of Wall Street sometimes landed privately piloted planes.

She'd had tutors, dancing teachers, riding lessons. She'd been traveled, coached, and analyzed. And after all the efforts to remake her, she'd been a peasant-headed, overgrown, awkward Dolly, plump with her baby fat, when at last she'd made her debut in Charleston. She'd returned to Farley City,

the one place that acknowledged her existence.

For Narris, the conquest of the overage deb presented no problems. He married her within a year of his arrival in Farley City, took her on an extended honeymoon in South America, and simply never returned to his desk or routine at the mills.

Within another year, her parents died in a boating accident. It seemed that everything was within Narris' grasp. Then came the discovery of the deeply hidden, rock hard, ice-locked facet of Dolly's character.

All of her life Dolly had bought friends, purchased attention, paid cash on the line for each moment of tenderness and respect. She didn't know there was any other way to get things. From the most intimate of moments with a man to the latest in cars, it was all the same. It was for sale. It had to be bought. Now she'd bought the greatest—love. And she wasn't about to let Narris get away.

The new knowledge of her was upsetting, even a little frightening. In this one way she was very strong and extremely smart. Narris discovered how far he could push her, the limits of his bounds, the tolerated truancies he could indulge and those he couldn't. And the years passed for them.

Three years ago a tragedy had indirectly brushed Ev Narris and Dolly. One day he was gone from Farley City, and it was whispered that a message through police channels had taken him away. Despite the power of Dolly's money, the truth leaked out. Someone vacationing in the mountains from Farley City had seen it in an Asheville paper.

The story, as Roberts remembered, had been brutally simple. Narris had had a sister,

Winifred, married to a man named Devlin Harkness. One night Harkness had chopped up his wife with a butcher knife, and seeing what he had done, had sat down, suddenly quite calm, and opened every artery he could find on his own body with the same knife.

No one in Farley City had even seen Devlin or Winifred Harkness. They'd never visited Narris and as for his part, Narris had cut all past ties for keeps the day he married Dolly. Or almost for keeps. Years later, he'd had to go and bury his sister and brother-in-law, never mentioning the subject when he returned to Farley City. And now, three more years later, he'd brought the daughter of Dev and Winnie Harkness home with him. Jan . . . of the pool in Two Mile creek, of a dinner table where no one else existed . . .

III

THE PHONE RANG, jarring Roberts out of his thoughts with a spasmodic twitch of his body. He reared upright on the bed, staring at the phone, reaching for it when it began a second ring.

A strained whisper came over the line. It took him a moment to recognize Dolly's voice, usually most recognizable of voices.

"Job, I simply have to talk to you."

"It's pretty late."

"I know, but . . . I saw the way you looked at Jan tonight . . . like a schoolboy ready to sit up, wag your tail, and slobber."

A muscle bunched in Roberts' jaw. "Dolly, you have such a diplomatic way of saying things."

"You shut up," she said in a slightly higher voice. "I haven't got all night. Ev might come back in the room any minute." She gulped a Dolly-like little breath. "If I didn't really like you, Job, I wouldn't take the trouble. You're the one person who could tell me where to cram my money if I tried to buy a favor you didn't think was right."

"Dolly . . ."

"Go away for a few days, Job. Before you get involved. Don't see her again. She won't be anything but evil for you, believe me."

"Why not?" he said angrily. "And what business is it of . . ."

"You don't know the truth about her, Job."

"I know there was gossip about Devlin and Winifred Harkness when it happened, Dolly, and I'm not interested in dredging up . . ."

"Oh, you poor simple fool, Job. I'm not talking about

them. I'm talking about her—Jan."

"I don't think she'd appreciate it, Dolly. Neither do I."

"For that, I should tell you to go to hell. But I won't. You're still one of the nicest bastards in Farley City, and I feel like I owe you the truth. You remember when Ev started making those periodic trips to Asheville—about three years ago?"

"Sure, you'd invested some money in a bleach plant up there and Ev went up now and then . . ."

"That's the story we leak out, Job. But it's a big, fat lie. You see, Jan was there the night it happened, the murder-suicide of her parents. She saw it all, the knife, the blood, everything. She was standing rigid as a gate post when the family was found. Just standing there with every muscle like frozen steel. It was almost three weeks before the doctors got even a slight muscular response from her, Job. During those three weeks you could have driven nails in her or cut off a finger and she'd never have known."

A hot mist washed Roberts' forehead.

"There is this private crazy house in Asheville with loads of specialists," Dolly was going on with the determination of an eight-track tape. "She—Jan—this object of your moon eyes—she's been in that private place for three years, Job. That's why Ev made the trips, why we let the cover story seep out."

"Well," Roberts said, feeling as he had files working in his throat, "it's three years later now, Dolly. I'm sure the doctors knew what they were doing when they released her.

"You're a fool," Dolly said, "like the doctors. But I'm not—and I'm not going to tolerate that sick thing in my house any longer than I have to."

"It's your house, Dolly," Roberts said coldly.

"Now I've really offended you," Dolly guessed from his tone. Her self-pitying little sigh was supposed to make him feel defensive and apologetic.

Roberts had had enough of the Narrises for one evening. "I'll think it over, Dolly."

"You'll see that I'm just thinking of your welfare."

"Good night, Dolly."

"I knew you'd be intelligent about it," she said sweetly, and hung up.

Roberts held the phone to his ear a moment longer. There was a second soft click. Narris had heard every word on an extension. Narris—or Jan.

Roberts slept badly and was in the kitchen waiting for morning coffee to work its miracle when Ev Narris showed

up bright and early. The visit was surprising. Narris wasn't a casual dropper-in, and he wasn't known for early early rising habits.

They returned to the kitchen and Roberts got out a cup and saucer for Narris. They sat down at the table in the eating area of the spacious kitchen, where Roberts took more of his meals than in the dining room.

Narris's hands clenched on the table top. "I heard Dolly's talk with you on the phone last night."

"Better you than Jan."

"Yes—damn that blubbery Dolly . . ." He caught himself, forced a sigh. "I wasn't conning you, Job. I meant to tell you everything about Jan—when you'd got to know her better. Now that Dolly has jumped the gun, I hope you'll not let it make any difference. You and Jan hit it off well last night. You found her attractive."

"You talk as if she needs me, Ev."

Narris accepted with a brief nod the cup of coffee that Roberts offered.

"She needs contact with you, because you're youth and health. Maybe I shouldn't have brought her here, into Dolly's presence. But I'm all Jan has."

"Are you afraid she isn't well?"

"Of course not! She's over all that past business—or the doctors wouldn't have released her. But it's been a tough time. She's a sensitive girl. I kept thinking of you during the trip, while I was bringing Jan home. I kept saying to myself that Job Roberts would be right for her, Job Roberts could show her some good fun and laughter, Job Roberts would find her so attractive he'd want to take her places and introduce her once again to real living."

"Maybe I do find her that attractive, Ev."

"Even in the face of what Dolly said about . . ."

"I think," Roberts said evenly, "I'll just leave you and Dolly to each other.

IV

JAN . . . There were moments when it seemed Job Roberts' mind had expected the name always and reserved a special place for it. More than a month had passed now, filled with her presence, the touch of her beside him in his car, her face across a candle-lit dinner table in Columbia, the electrifying image of her in a bikini at Myrtle Beach, a full weekend of her in romantic old Charleston . .

Sometimes he felt as if he knew her better than he'd ever known anyone. And then came moments when he had the

quicksand feeling that he didn't know her at all, moments when a shadow from some strange and frightening dimension came stealing between them.

A week ago Roberts had tried to probe Doctor Samuel Conklin indirectly about chances of a recurrence of her troubles. He hadn't seen much of Doc of late, or any of his usual friends for that matter, so he'd made a point of bumping into Conklin in the Amusement Palace and standing a beer.

After the preliminaries, he'd veered the talk toward the field of medicine. "You're a psychiatrist as well as M. D., Doc. You do it all in these parts."

"Just an old fool squandered his talents where he thought they were needed most," Conklin said.

"Too few left like you, Doc. You might have . . ."

"Son, if you're leading up to Jan Harkness," Conklin broke in, "I'm not a magician. I can't pull any prognostic rabbits out of medical hats. But if you're worried about her, bring her in to see me."

"I'm not worried particularly, Doc."

"I know," the bulbous old man nodded. "You just can't help wondering if she's a hundred percent safe, sound, whole. Well, Job, none of us is that. Ain't a person in Farley City today I wouldn't be taking to our decrepit Ridover Sanatarium if fate nudged hard enough. Far as that goes," Doc Conklin snorted, "some of them down the road at Ridover could pass the time of day better than some folks running loose in our fine county."

Tonight, Doc's words returned to haunt Roberts. Jan was standing at the living room window looking out in the night, too quietly it seemed to Roberts. They'd had dinner in his home. The housekeeper had prepared it, served it, departed, leaving just the two of them in the pleasant house. During dinner, Jan had forced an effort to enjoy herself. Now, standing stiffly at the window, she stated in a quiet, thin voice: "I'm afraid, Job."

He touched her shoulder in quick alarm. "Of what?"

"Dolly. She doesn't like me, Job. She's planning against me. I know. I feel it. I see it in her eyes. Dolly is plotting some way to get rid of me."

A hot sweat washed down Roberts' spine. She'd turned to look into his eyes, and she lifted a hand to touch his face gently, adoringly. "Darling, please . . . don't look so—so frightened. You're wondering suddenly if I'm paranoid? Well, I'm not. This is a real problem, Job. If it hadn't been for Uncle

Eversham. Dolly would have had me out the day after I arrived. But Dolly knows just how far she can push him, and this is one time Ev has dug in, taken a stand." She glanced away. "It isn't very pleasant for me, having to stay there, knowing I'm not wanted."

"Then get a place of your own, Jan!"

"Could I?" She walked a few steps and sat on the edge of a wing chair. "At first . . . after being shut away for three years . . . I was fearful of everything beyond the front gate. I wanted to run back, even if they had said it was all right for me to leave."

Roberts eased to a sideways position beside her her and took her hand. "But you made it past the front gate. You can make it out of a house where you're unhappy."

Her sooty eyes glinted with fresh hope and courage. "You'll help me, Job?"

"Yes, of course!"

"You're good for me, Job."

"I like being good for you. I want to. You have no idea how much I want to."

The sound of the door chimes broke in, bringing a look of annoyance to Roberts' face. He got up and crossed the living room and foyer. When he opened the front door, Ev Narris was standing outside. His lips were set and the dregs of anger were in his eyes.

"Let me intrude, Roberts." Narris's breath was heavy with alcohol, although he showed no other signs of drinking. "I had to get away from Dolly and that everlasting whining and needling."

There was no graceful way for Roberts to keep the evening to Jan and himself. So he accepted the fact and said with civilized pleasantness, "Come in, Ev."

In the living room, Narris said hello to Jan, saw whiskey and glasses on the cocktail table, and poured himself a stiff drink. He tossed it down straight. "Let's have an adventure! We'll show Jan some local color, Job. How about Pete's place as a starter?"

"I'd rather not," Roberts said.

"What is Pete's place?" Jan asked.

"A genuine jook," Narris said. "Outlanders bastardized the spelling to j-u-k-e and used it to label coin-operated record players. But the old time jook was a place, an event. Jooking meant an evening in a pine-slab roadhouse built out in the scrub, foot stomping music and hundred-ten proof pure white corn liquor."

Jan's eyes sparked excitement. She stood up eagerly. "Sounds like fun. How about it, Job?"

Roberts hesitated a moment.

"Come on, Job," Narris said, "it would be good for her to take a flyer off the beaten path." Reluctantly, Roberts agreed. They drove over in Roberts' car.

Pete, the proprietor, was pleased by the visit of what was to him uptown society. He escorted Jan, Roberts, and Narris to a corner table in the long, rambling, rough building. He was a big monolith of muscle in baggy slacks and wilted white shirt below a bull neck and swarthy, bettle-browed, misshapen face.

"You folks make yourselfs right to home," Pete rumbled. "I'll get a clean cloth for this here table and tell cook to pick out some choice morsels of fresh-caught catfish and fix them special."

When the party was seated, Roberts looked over the drab, smoky gin mill. It was moderately crowded with millhands and their girls. The string band was loud, and the crowd was beginning to get tripped out on illegal rotgut.

Pete returned from the lean-to kitchen, whipping a dingy gray cloth onto the table and setting out a bowl of ice, glasses, and a tall bottle of ginger ale.

"Figured you folks would bring your own drinking stuff," Pete said with a yellow-toothed laugh.

Narris nodded. "We brown-bagged a fifth." He pulled the package from under his jacket. "We'll order later."

Narris started mixing drinks and telling the story of the time he'd been picked up in a raid on a jook mill. "Never reached jail. You should have seen the look on the police chief's face when he realized his daughter was my date. Quite a girl . . . quite a girl . . . all that was B. D. of

course . . . Before Dolly . . . damn!—there really was a time before Dolly."

Roberts didn't feel much like talking. The dreary place depressed him, the faint smells of greasy frying catfish, sour mash whiskey, the noise, the atmosphere of rough abandonment.

Now and then he glanced at Jan while Narris carried the conversation. Her eyes were sparkly with a sense of adventure.

V

THEN QUITE suddenly a rough oath exploded out of the general noise. It came from a nearby table. Roberts cut his gaze around. On the far side of the table, facing him, he saw a big, uncouth man rearing to his feet. Roberts had seen him around Farley City. Jakes was his name. Clem Jakes.

A man and woman were at the table with Jakes. Jakes called the man a dirty name. The man was frozen in his chair. Jakes repeated the obscenity. The woman, a forty-year-old slattern over whom the argument seemed to have started, got from her chair with a yelp of fright and ran toward the further wall.

Roberts on his feet, his thoughts instantly on Jan. From the corner of his eyes, Roberts saw Jakes pull a switchblade from his dungarees pocket and trigger the button. Six inches of steel glittered cold and bright in his fist.

There were outcries and the scrape of feet rushing to clear a space. Roberts glimpsed Pete moving into the edge of the scene to restore order to his place. This was serious trouble, no mistaking that.

Roberts grasped Jan's arm and tried to pull her from her chair. She wouldn't budge, her eyes like two bright, black lights on the knife in Clem Jakes's hand, her own hands knotted with immovable strength on the seat of her chair.

"Jan!" Roberts said with a note of desperation.

He couldn't get through to her. He caught her shoulders roughly. He heard Jakes' table crash to one side. Throwing a look over his shoulder, he saw Jakes lunging at the other man, the man eel away, Jakes plunging headlong from the force of his own momentum. No one was between Jakes and Jan. The knife and Jan. Its glittering tip hurtling directly at her with Jakes's bulk behind it . . .

Roberts had one split instant of seeing the change writhing through Jan's face, the look of

sick fascination, the weird rapture in her eyes as she arched and strained the slim white loveliness of her throat toward the knife.

Roberts hit Jakes flush in the mouth with a movement so quick it was unseen. Jakes staggered back, and Roberts slashed and pounded with his fists, striking empty air and knowing that Jakes had fallen. He saw Jakes, without the knife now, scuttling away on the floor with blood pouring from his nose and mouth. Roberts lunged after him, but two heavy weights hit him, one on either side. His arms were pressed and held against his sides.

"Easy, Mr. Roberts!" Pete said, his voice close to Roberts' left ear. "You've clobbered him—you don't want to kill him!"

The words had their sobering effect. Some of the tension went from Roberts' body. He looked from one face to the other, from Pete who'd grabbed him on the left to Narris on his right.

"I'm all right," Roberts said thickly. "Let me go."

As they released him, Roberts turned toward Jan. The vacancy of her caused his heart to slip a beat. He took her hand, and she stood at last, though woodenly.

Roberts heard Pete's profuse apologies for the incident, and Narris saying, ". . . No, we don't want the police rung in any more than you do . . . Anyway, it's all over and nobody got hurt except Clem Jakes."

The crowd made way as Roberts guided Jan from the place. He crossed the sandy parking lot to his car, Narris springing ahead to open the door.

Jan didn't seem to know what she was to do. Roberts got her into the car seat with guiding pressures of his hands and murmured instructions he might have used to a frightened child.

Narris got in the back, and as Roberts started the car, Narris said, "Well, it didn't turn out so well."

Understatement of the year, Roberts thought. He didn't bother to reply. As he drove onto the state road, he flicked a look at Jan every few seconds. At last she seemed to be breathing again. She lifted her knuckles wearily to her mouth.

"I want to go home, Job. I'm tired. I want to rest."

"Do you feel . . ."

"Just tired. Please, . . . I don't want to talk about it."

The car gobbled up highway paving, and the Narris driveway turn-off rushed into view. The headlights bored through the dark tunnel of pine

shadows. The house showed around the final bend.

The living room was lighted, and Dolly was up, pulling back the drapery to look outside as she heard the sound of the car.

Roberts stopped the car near the front door, got out, and went around it. He shouldered Ev Narris aside and helped Jan out.

"Sure you're okay?" he persisted.

She nodded. "I'll be fine. I just want to get inside. Good night."

He stood, shut out and helpless, watching her almost run to the front door. He glimpsed Dolly opening the door, then closing it as Jan disappeared inside.

He turned on Narris in coldly controlled anger.

Narris spoke softly, with uncharacteristic humility. "Don't you think I'm saying the same thing to myself, Job? I'm to blame. I'd give my right arm if I'd never suggested taking her to Pete's place."

None of the terrible coldness went from Roberts' eyes. Narris ventured to touch him on the arm.

"Job, how was I to know we'd run into trouble? I think we both need a drink—and no matter how you feel about me right now, I want you to stay the night."

It might be best, Roberts thought. If he stayed over, he could see how Jan was first thing tomorrow morning. He might want Doc Conklin to have a look at her.

Hours later, Roberts struggled through a fog of fretful sleep. He was disoriented for a moment. Then he remembered, all of it, and snapped to full wakefulness.

He sat bolt upright, aware that the pounding of a fist on his door had awakened him. The knob was rattling. The door slammed open.

Roberts clicked on the bed light and swung his feet to the floor. Narris stood in the pool of light, framed in the doorway. His blue silk pajamas were sweat-glued to his shaking body, his bare feet thrust hurriedly into his shoes, his face splotched with a mindless terror.

Narris tried to speak, but only retching noises came from him. Roberts caught him by the shoulders and saw that Narris was beyond coherence. He released Narris and ran into the hallway. It was dimly lighted, infused with the glow that came from the open doorway of a room at the further end of the hall.

Roberts reached Jan's door. It also stood open. He clicked on a light. The bed where she'd slept

was rumpled. The room was empty.

Skin prickling with fear, he ran to the further, lighted room. He knew it was Dolly's; she'd always had her private boudoir.

At the doorway, Roberts hit an invisible barrier. Dolly was a gory mess on her frilly bed. Her upper arms, puffy shoulders, and back of her head were pillowed in blood that still seeped sluggishly from the gaping hole a sharp knife had torn in her plump neck.

Roberts struggled to keep from blacking out. A sensation of being disembodied washed over him. It was as if he'd stepped outside of himself and was watching an animated, empty puppet reel its way back to Narris who was still in a state of rigid shock.

"Where is Jan?"

"Don't know," Narris gasped. "Heard noise . . . Found Dolly . . ." Narris covered his face with his hands, but Job Roberts pulled them away.

"Did you look for Jan?"

"Look? . . . No . . . Came straight to you . . . Find Jan . . ."

"Yes, we must. And quickly! You'll help me."

"No," Narris said almost wildly. "Can't . . . Sick . . ." He began blubbering. "I'm very sick, Job . . ."

Each detail was becoming so stark it seemed to be happening in a moment that would never end. The ragged sound of Eversham Narris's breathing, the stifling shadows in the room, the red marks on the carpet near the door like the red on Dolly's shoulders, the stillness of the night outside.

Leaving Narris to the house, Roberts dredged a calm steadiness from some inner source that he hadn't previously known he possessed. His search of the ground was thorough, in ever-widening circles that at last carried to the brush-grown stream a quarter-mile from the house.

Keeping his footing on the slippery red clay of the creek bank with difficulty, he glimpsed a splash of white in the darkness ahead.

He ran toward her, calling her name. She whimpered and scuttled away, and when he closed on her, she screamed and tried to cut him with the knife.

VI

THE DAY following, Job Roberts drank himself into a blurred state. He walked straight, talked straight. Looking at him, no one suspected how really drunk he was. He told himself he was acting like a weakling, but he didn't really

care. It was a way of getting through one hour after another, each one a collection of cutting minutes.

Farley City buzzed with the juiciest gossip in its history. The death of Dolly Narris would become legend, a major chapter in local lore.

Meantime, the official wheels turned—quietly and discreetly. With Dolly gone, Eversham Narris was the most powerful single voice in the county, and he desired the necessities performed quietly and discreetly.

Narris requested a trial by judge, rather than impanelment of a jury. Held behind closed doors, the proceeding was more in the nature of a hearing before old Judge Dimeon Coxly. The stooped figure on the bench was nearing senility and apt to catnap if a lawyer's speech ran too long. But the old man still had the acumen, as from his ambitious youth, to know which side of the political bread had the butter.

Roberts testified briefly as to the events of the night Dolly Narris was killed.

The sheriff told the court that, responding to a call, he had found Jan Harkness at the Narris residence, restrained by a makeshift straitjacket which Job Roberts had fashioned from torn bedsheeting. Seeing the girl's condition, the sheriff had transported her immediately to Ridover Sanatarium, rather than jail, where she was placed in restraint with one of his deputies on security duty.

Narris produced a few records he'd obtained from the mental hospital where Jan had been confined following the death of her parents, records sufficient to prove a previous breakdown.

Doctor Samuel Conklin attested Jan's present loss of contact with reality.

And the judge rendered a verdict of not guilty by virtue of insanity. Within the hour he had issued the papers ordering Jan's confinement in a licensed mental institution indeterminately, until such time as she was pronounced legally sane by duly authorized medical authorities.

So it was over and done, almost before the first drops of gossip leaked through Farley City.

Job Roberts came silently from the hearing, shouldering his way past the reporters who'd collected from several metropolitan areas in the southeast. He drove over to Two Mile creek and carried a fifth of scotch in a brown paper bag to the grassy bank overlooking the pool. He was there until the sun had set and the bottle was nearly empty.

But if Roberts had showed

signs of tucking his tail for the first time in his life, Doc Conklin showed signs of short patience.

A week after Dolly's death, Conklin walked into Roberts' bedroom in early morning and kicked over the bedside table. The resultant crash of furniture and empty liquor bottles brought Roberts groggily to life. He saw Doc's pink mass hovering near the bed, groaned, struggled to a sitting position on the side of the bed, and looked about glumly. His eyes were swollen, and a beard stubble covered the thinned-down planes of his face.

"You've made one hell of a mess in here, Doc."

"You made it, bub. Don't go whining your troubles to the other man's doorstep."

"Get lost, Doc."

"Your office is going to hell in a basket, bub. Mrs. Wharton and your housekeeper are worried sick about you." Conklin kicked a broken bottle across the room. "Now get your butt off the bed and scrape some of that filth off your face. You've laid around here sucking your thumb long enough."

Doc's voice was rough, but deep within it was a little breaking note, and Roberts looked up slowly, with eyes that focussed. He sat there, balanced on the edge of a long, silent moment, just looking at Conklin. Then he got up, picked his way through the broken glass on the carpet. He went into the bathroom and slammed his door.

Looking at the closed door, Doc Conklin nodded and smiled to himself.

When Roberts re-entered the bedroom, showered and shaven, Conklin had departed. Roberts wasn't surprised. Doc had said what he'd had to say, done the job he'd come to do, and closed the book on the matter.

It was a fine day, a sun-dappled Indian summer day, and each hour gave Roberts a little more steadiness of stomach and brain. Both his housekeeper and Mrs. Wharton affected unconcern, but he could sense their matronly relief at seeing him up and about. The booze-steeped days had been a waste, he knew, accomplishing nothing, leaving him with a burned-out feeling and the need to fight off the urge to continue retreating.

He took care of the most pressing business matters with only a part of his mind and attention. The focus of his thoughts was Ridover, and at eleven o'clock he was turning his car onto the driveway.

A few patients were strolling the grounds or playing cards or checkers beneath big beach

umbrellas, whitely startched nurses and attendants in sufficient evidence.

Roberts parked the Eldorado and entered a shadowy rotunda that connected the two wings of the hospital. The asphalt-tiled floor seemed to have been waxed and buffed a million times throughout the years. At a circular receptionist desk a youngish woman in green smock and nurse's cap was sorting cards in a three-by-five file, looking up as Roberts approached.

He had to wait ten minutes, while his palms got wet. Then a large, brusque-looking woman of middle age came down the north corridor.

"Mr. Roberts?"

He noddded, and she said, "This way, please," and as they moved off, she added, "We'll keep this first visit short, shan't we? And be very careful of what we say. Miss Harkness is still clinging to a very thin edge."

Jan had a pleasant room overlooking the front lawn. One of the round-the-clock private nurses Narris had employed was arranging the flowers Roberts had ordered to be sent out that morning. The nurse gave him a totally impersonal nod when he entered. He hardly saw her. Jan was standing at the window, turning slowly as if to savor the anticipation of seeing him.

"Hello, Job." There was the merest hint of sudden tears in her large, dark eyes.

"Hi. I see the flowers got here okay."

"They're lovely."

He said, "You're looking great, Jan."

"I'm feeling much better." Her eyes brooded briefly. "I'm still all twisted up about what happened . . . that night."

The nurse's hands continued busily with the flowers, but her head snapped about and she shot Roberts a warning look.

Obediently, he changed the subject. "Wonder if they'd let me hang around and lunch with you?"

The nurse gave him the smallest nod of approval.

Jan showed the first sign of real animation. "They'd better! We'll have trays right there by the window. You'll love the food, Job! It has a fabulous old-time flavor, like you'd imagine food in grandma's farmhouse kitchen."

"I'm all for that!"

VII

DURING THE following days they spoke of Ridover's landscaping, the squirrels that ventured from nearby woods onto the grounds, cotton prices which

were making Roberts a profit, and the weather. They played gin and sometimes watched a morning quiz show on television.

Within a week the nurses let Jan stroll the lawns with him for longer periods, and there were moments when everything might have seemed perfectly normal, if the white-coated attendant had been removed from the background.

Over beers in the Amusement Palace, Doc Conklin confided that Jan was making remarkable recovery, and the urge to drown his troubles in a bottle gradually began easing its grip on Roberts.

At the end of that week, he was choosing a pair of shoes to go with dark plaid slacks. He reached, then stood looking at the low shelf where a half-dozen pairs of various styles reposed. All had shoe trees. But there was one set of trees too many, just visible under the shelf.

Strange. A pair of shoes was missing. The black ones . . . the shoes he'd worn the night of Dolly's Narris' death.

He bent and began rummaging. He found the shoes without difficulty. They were under the shelf, where he'd dropped them on the floor and inadvertantly scooted them in the days since, bumping them out of sight in his trips to the closet to get out clothing.

He straightened up, holding the shoes. They needed cleaning badly. The soles and por-

tions of the uppers were still caked with red clay mud from the creek bank where he'd found Jan with the knife.

He walked over to the bed and sat down, still looking at the shoes. They brought the whole episode back painfully. And then the mental motion picture stopped, reversed a few frames, and stopped again.

He didn't breathe for the moment. Once again he was in the Narris guest room, an incoherent Eversham Narris limned haggardly in the doorway. Roberts was seeing the red marks on the guest room carpet. Marks left by red clay. Red clay that had come from the very spot on the creek bank where he'd found Jan long moments later . . .

Again, he heard himself saying to Narris: "Did you look for Jan?"

And once more Narris was replying: "No . . . Came straight to you . . ."

Less than an hour later, Roberts was in the office of Sheriff Noel Latham.

A homely, rawboned, sandy-colored man, Latham had held his office for twenty years against all upstart political comers. His instincts bordered on genius, not the instincts of a master sleuth, but those of the old, vanishing school of Southern sheriffs and the political system which had spawned them. Latham successfully identified with many segments. The sharecroppers were convinced that he was a friend, and the politicians knew that he was a reasonable man, a comfortable man to have in office.

He'd never had much truck with the Robertses. He was wary of men whose integrity didn't have a price, and he'd always been cunningly careful to keep his official conduct—his publicly known conduct—within the outer limit of political safety. It didn't pay to rile men like the Robertses; they were apt to go out on a limb and clean house. It had happened, was happening, in many parts of the South.

Latham shook hands with Job Roberts and passed the time of day, studying the young man's face as they sat down on either side of the sheriff's scarred desk. Clearly, from the look of him, Roberts had something important on his mind, and Latham's slaty eyes were instantly alert.

Roberts said carefully, "I think you should pick up Eversham Narris for questioning, Noel."

Like that. Like Narris wasn't right now, in terms of power, the biggest man in the county.

Roberts took a breath. "Not

telling you how to run your job, Noel."

" 'Preciate that."

"But I want to know why Narris covered himself with a lie the night of Dolly's death—and I'm sure you'll want the same answers."

Latham rocked back in his old, creaking swivel chair. "I thought it all came out before Judge Coxly, Roberts. Sounded to me like everybody told a simple, straightforward story."

"That's right," the young man agreed. "You've had nothing to be suspicious of, up to now."

"And now what have I got?"

"A contradiction. Go back to the night of Dolly's death. Narris woke me, pounding on the door. During the course of the next few minutes, he said that he had just then come to my room. But he was lying. He had secretly entered the room just a few minutes before, without waking me."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't think it, Noel," Roberts corrected. "I know it. There were mud marks from his shoes on the carpet. It didn't mean a thing, the way everything was happening right then. But today I remembered—today it means plenty."

Latham was silent for a long minute. With some men, Latham would have thanked them for coming in, murmured some assurances, and let it go at that. But he knew it wouldn't work with Job Roberts.

He said carefully, "Just what do you think it means, Roberts?"

"It might very well mean that Jan Harkness didn't kill Dolly at all."

"You're accusing Narris?"

"I don't think it's time to accuse anybody, yet." Roberts' gaze was heavy and direct. "But the thought doesn't surprise you one bit, does it, Noel? The thought of Narris killing Dolly doesn't seem surprising at all. We've all known how cold and calculating he can be, from the way he married her. We've known how much he covets and values all that money. He sold himself just to get close to it. If the opportunity came, it's not one bit surprising that he'd get Dolly out of the way and own all the money at last."

Latham was soberly silent. His face was mask-like, and this in itself was a hint of how little he was liking this. Clearly, the last thing Noel Lathm wanted was a re-opening of the Narris murder case.

"Let's stick to that night," Roberts continued. "I swear there was red mud on the car-

pet. I believe it proves Narris lied about not being out earlier. If he lied on that small point, why not on other—larger points?"

Latham stirred uncomfortably. "Narris may have a perfectly logical explanation. Fact is, I'm sure he has."

Roberts' face whitened slightly. "Fact is, I'm not surprised that you're sure. But I'd like to hear his explanation."

VIII

WHEN LATHAM had summed up the new finding, speaking quietly in the Narris living room, Eversham Narris at last looked at Roberts. Narris had said little and except for a slight tightening nothing about his face had changed. But as his gaze finally met Roberts', no human quality was in his eyes. They were depthless with a quality beyond mere anger or hatred, a deadly quality that gave him complete control over himself.

Latham was waiting for Narris to speak, and when Narris did so, it was through a faint, tight smile.

"Right now, I think that Job is a mixed up young man. First he stayed dog drunk when Jan went into Ridover. Now he's imagining things because his mind refuses to admit that Jan might have done such a thing to Dolly. He's in love with Jan. Only natural he'd believe anything rather than face the facts. Love does that to a man. Notice his drinking lately?"

The explanation took Latham off the hook. It was one man's words against another's. Roberts had no evidence to back up his, but Narris could offer the fact of Roberts' behavior.

Roberts watched the passing scenery as he rode with Latham back to the sheriff's office. He wasn't particularly put down. He hadn't expected Latham to rush out and arrest Narris. If anything, Roberts was stiffening inwardly.

Latham cleared his throat as they rolled down Main street. "You see my position, Roberts. I can't act unless you show me some evidence."

"Maybe I will," Roberts said as he got out of the car.

His tone caused Latham to look at him sharply. "I wouldn't go off any deep ends if I was you. Eversham Narris deserves the protection of the law, same as anybody else."

"I'll remember the warning, Sheriff."

Driving out to Ridover that afternoon, Roberts felt a touch of a new fear. There was even stronger reason for Jan to get well quickly now. To remember,

to clear up the truth about Dolly's death.

But if she showed signs of remembering, what would Narris do? Narris could be the first to see the signs. He was even more constant in his visitations at Ridover than Roberts, showing a solicitude for her progress that now, in Roberts' mind, had a double-barrelled meaning.

Nearing the sanitarium, he saw Narris' car up ahead, slowing to make the turn at Ridover. Roberts also braked, deciding to postpone his appearance. Tomorrow or the next day, he and Narris could possibly manage civility in her presence for the sake of her state of mind. But Roberts doubted if this moment was the right one for throwing himself and Narris together.

He turned around on the first sideroad and started back to town. His mind refused to let go the thought of the security Narris was enjoying. From here on, it seemed to be clear sailing for the man. All he had to do was sit tight until the shock waves from Dolly's death had simmered down.

If Jan continued her remarkable recovery, Narris would run into no problems in having her released to his custody in a very short time. Old Doctor Conklin might balk, but Narris practically owned the county now as Dolly's sole heir. He could wrap all the political strings around his fingers. All he needed was a court order signed by Judge Coxly.

Narris would have to provide her supervision as a matter of course. But that wouldn't bother him either. There were plenty of lugs around who flunkied in mental hospitals and who would act as faithful keeper for the money Narris could pay, reporting every word she said to Narris.

The convenience of her breakdown had opened every door for Narris, and once he took her out of Ridover nobody could close any of them. Narris had proven, as far as Roberts was concerned, that he could act with complete heartlessness. If necessary, it wouldn't be beyond Narris to arrange a convenient accident for Jan, should she start remembering things he didn't want her to.

If for Jan . . . how about Dolly? Robert's breathing thinned. Had Narris arranged his conveniences all from the start?

It was a slim possibility, but it was all Roberts had, and as he entered the city limits he again stopped the car and changed directions. This time he headed for Clem Jakes' place.

The house was typical of the rural, southern backwoods. It

was a clapboard shack with a rickety front porch and a barren front yard where a few chickens scratched. The only out-of-kilter note was a sparkling new Cutlass parked close beside the end of the house.

Roberts stared hard at the car as he stopped the Eldorado and got out. There was no question that it was new.

He cut his gaze to the front of the house. It seemed deserted. Then he saw the flicker of a dingy curtain behind a front window. He heard a woman's voice speak quickly inside as he neared the front door.

Mrs. Jakes appeared in the doorway when Roberts reached the foot of the swaybacked, plank steps. She stood smiling down at him.

"Well howdy there, Mr. Roberts! This is surely an unexpected pleasure. What in the world brings you out thisaway?"

Once, she must have been a kind of girl described as "a pretty little thing". Now, she was a thin, sallow impression of gauntness in a faded house dress.

"I wanted to talk to Clem, Mrs. Jakes."

She gave a good-natured laugh, which had probably seen her through many troubles. "Lan' sakes, Mr. Roberts after that whopping you give him in Pete's place, you ain't Clem's favorite person."

Roberts smiled. "But I don't believe in carrying grudges, Mrs. Jakes."

"Me neither. And I reckon Clem was asking for it. He told it different, but I know my man pretty well. He gets away with a lot, but ever' now and then somebody just has to whop him one."

"If you'll tell him I'm here, Mrs. Jakes . . ."

IX

JOB ROBERTS was interrupted by the explosive roar of a car's engine and the spewing of gravel as the gears were engaged. The Cutlass spun away from the side of the house, raising a billow of dust. Roberts ducked and shielded his face with his forearm as the rear wheels showered the front of the house with bits of dirt that stung through his clothing.

The car was instantly swallowed in the dust pall, its tires screaming as it slewed onto the macadam surface of the state road. Roberts ran a few steps toward his own car, slowed, stopped. Jakes had too much of a head start. Even if the Eldorado overtook him, what then? Force him off the road? Chase Clem across the palmetto and scrub on foot? Stop him

with a flying tackle? Force the truth from him?

That's the way it happened on television, Roberts reflected.

He turned back to the front porch where Mrs. Jakes was still standing, her hand holding onto one of the unpainted two-by-four posts.

"Seems you didn't have to announce me," Roberts said, brushing dust from his slacks.

"Looks that way," she agreed. "Clem was taking a nap when I heard your car coming up."

"Speaking of cars, where'd he get that job?"

"Said a fellow loaned it to him."

"Name of Eversham Narris?"

She regarded him a moment. "I honestly don't know, Mr. Roberts."

He was inclined to believe her.

"I learned a long time ago not to mess in Clem's business," she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Jakes?"

"How could Clem fetch himself a fancy car from a high-toned man like Mr. Narris?"

As payment, Roberts thought. Payment for staging a scene in a jook joint—where Narris insisted we go that night.

He didn't say it of course. "Just a thought I had," he said. "Don't let it worry you, Mrs. Jakes."

But an hour later he was in

Noel Latham's office, outlining his thoughts to the sheriff.

Latham was annoyed and he let a little of it show. "Now let me get this straight, Roberts. Let's go over what you've just suggested. It amounts to one thing. Narris paid Clem Jakes to create a moment of violence, directed at Jan, so's she would relapse emotionally and provide him with the cover he needed to kill Dolly. Is that it?"

Roberts reddened slightly. Latham's words and tone of voice undercut the simple plausibility of his reasoning. "Why not? Stranger things have happened. It was all too convenient, Sheriff, too coincidental. It dovetailed too neatly. Narris brings a girl here who is barely out of a mental ward. He insists on throwing her and me together. He steers us into the

unlikeliest of spots, Pete's place. And that night, that precise night, Clem Jakes is there, knife and all, starting a vicious fight, stumbling with the naked blade directly at the girl who'd seen more than her own share of knife work."

Latham toyed with a pencil on his desk, not looking up. "Then I suppose Narris insisted on you spending the night in his guest room so's you could catch him in the act of killing Dolly."

Roberts gusted out an exasperated breath. "So's he could have a patsy, Sheriff. A patsy he'd roped in right from the first. A patsy sleeping in the guest room whom he could wake up, expose to the whole phony picture, and claim as an unimpeachable witness. So's he could have a damfool straight unwittingly locking it all up respectably there in the courtroom before Judge Coxly. And it would have all gone without a hitch, if I hadn't come across the shoes, days later, that I had worn the night of Dolly's death. If I hadn't noticed the red color of the mud on them and connected it up with the marks on the guest room carpet."

Latham's nostrils had pinched in at the way Roberts mimicked his tone and manner of speaking. Roberts didn't care. He was becoming as impatient with Latham as the sheriff was with him.

Standing in front of the desk, Roberts rested his knuckles on its top and leaned a little toward Latham. "Sheriff, there comes a time when there's barb wire on the top of a fence a man is straddling."

"That's for sure," Latham said with surprising good humor. "I don't like it worth a damn, being caught between a Roberts and a Narris."

"Part of the hazards of the trade, Sheriff. You know that Narris is clever and capable of doing everything I've said that he did."

"And if the girl hadn't cracked after the scene in Pete's place?"

"Nothing lost for Narris. He'd have just waited for another chance to get Dolly out of the way. But it did work, Sheriff. Just as it had every chance of working."

"Well," Latham said reluctantly, "I'll talk to Clem Jakes. But it wouldn't surprise me at all if he made a lucky run of moonshine and a down payment on a car that somebody will have to repossess in due time."

"Just make sure, Sheriff. That's all I ask."

The next two weeks were a drag. Narris carefully avoided a direct meeting with Roberts,

and Clem Jakes with equal care stayed away from hearth and home. Clem's protracted absence was not in itself unusual. He was often gone for weeks, carousing, getting drunk in a nearby town and doing thirty days in whatever local pokey.

Meanwhile, there was one positive factor. Jan was showing increasing awareness of reality every day.

"It's not uncommon," Doc Conklin told Roberts. "Sometimes a person suffering from a psychic shock will pull out of it in short order, sometimes in years, sometimes never. She's lucky, this girl. She's coming back fast. She'd been through it once, and perhaps deep in her subconcious a strength, a resistance developed that first time."

"Like immunity from a vaccination?"

"Hardly that, Job. But the books are full of case histories of mental patients who returned for treatment a second or third time, each time of shorter duration until a final cure was effected and they never had to come back at all. You can be encouraged, bub. I think in this instance we've a classic case of happy rebound on our hands."

"Will she remember everything, Doc? Including the details of the night of Dolly's death?"

The huge shoulders lifted, dropped. "Who can say? Maybe, maybe not. I'm legally bound by the court to certify her capacity to differentiate right from wrong, legal sanity, nothing more. Ethically and personally I'm bound to cure her as completely as possible."

Cure . . . and with it perhaps a threat to Narris. Cure . . . and a deadly danger to her.

X

THE FIRST FROST came, and Farley City residents raked leaves, punched time clocks in the mill, and left Dolly Narris' death behind in the routine of living.

Roberts heard a rumor that Clem Jakes was back in the county. He drove out to Pete's slab-sided jook joint in early afternoon. Not surprising, the drab building, where lives had been changed in a single fractured moment, was deserted. Pete was at his house a hundred yards away, working on a pickup truck.

Pete pulled his heavy torso from the mouthlike, opened hood when he heard Roberts approach. He stood big and oaken in dirty jeans and denim shirt, wiping his grease-blacked hands on a rag.

"Howdy."

"How are you doing, Pete?"

"Poorly. Been a bad summer. Boys from the alcohol board of control has give me a bad time. Now the jooking season is just about over. Folks," he grinned wryly, "just don't seem to come out on a cold night to a jook mill heated with a pot-bellied stove."

"Then how'd you like to make some money?"

"Long as it's honest. I know I sell some bootleg, but that's a man's right in these parts."

"It's honest," Roberts assured him.

"All right. And how much is in it?"

"I want you to keep an eye on Eversham Narris' place."

"Now, Mr. Roberts, I ain't . . ."

"Let me finish," Roberts broke in. "I'm not asking you to intrude or trespass. I simply want to know if Clem Jakes goes over there. If so, he'll slip in, do it on the quiet, you can get on it."

"I might be able to do that," Pete said. He carefully wiped grease from his knuckles. "Just that and nothing more. I might be able to do it if the price was right."

"How about a hundred dollars? And if Clem and Narris hold a pow-wow and you get the word to me immediately, another hundred."

"Mr. Roberts, you just bought yourself a spy."

Roberts heard nothing from Pete for two days, and when he did so, the news was as disappointing as the weather was bad.

The first autumnal storm was moving in, and the sky outside was dark with angry gray clouds. A wrathful wind was whipping sheets of rain over the streets and rooftops of Farley City. Lights had already been turned on in occupied homes and buildings. Roberts had sent Mrs. Wharton home early because of the miserable, blustery weather, and an hour after that he was closing the office door behind himself when Pete's call caught him.

"Mr. Roberts?"

"Yes."

"Eversham Narris is onto us. That mother's son is slick as a fox with eyes in the back of its head. I ain't exactly a city dude when it comes to slipping around in the woods. But somehow he'd spotted me. He knew I was out there.

"Today, just before the storm rolled in, he proved to be a little slicker than I was. Never saw him leave the house. Never knew he was close around—until he come up behind me. Him and that pair of big dogs. He ordered them onto me, and for a while I was fair put to it

to keep from getting tore to bits. I don't mind saying that I plowed one hell of a big break through the brush, getting away from there. So I'm quitting you."

Roberts' shoulders moved in a slight sag of disappointment. For Pete, Roberts had a moment of sympathy. Perfectly trained, Narris' Dalmatians turned into killer-watchdogs on command.

"Are you all right, Pete?"

"Except for some ripped clothes and a gash on my arm."

"See a doctor, Pete, and send me the bill."

"But I'm quitting you, Mr. Roberts. Our deal is off."

"I understand, and thanks for trying, Pete. Keep the hundred. You've earned it."

Roberts cradled the phone slowly. To him, the incident was one more bit of evidence of Narris' guilt. A completely innocent man didn't read the mind of the opposition so cleverly and shore up the possibility of being spied upon.

But it wasn't anything he could take to Noel Latham as proof. Latham would probably give the incident an opposite interpretation and see in it visible sign that Roberts was becoming obsessed with the idea of Narris' guilt. The sheriff would no doubt end up by warning Roberts of the inadvisability of hiring a spy to invade another citizen's privacy.

Roberts moved through the next couple of hours with an inner feeling to match the weather. He was ridden with a sense of the inevitability of Narris' victory.

He drove home over streets awash with clay-stained water, ate a dinner he barely tasted, and watched his housekeeper drive away in her small car.

The house was empty and hateful, not a haven in a storm that was now cutting fresh gullies, gashing hillsides, and causing creeks to rampage out of their banks.

He wondered how the storm was affecting the sooty-eyed girl in her private room in Ridover. He wandered to the front window, looking at the wildness of the night.

XI

THE SCREAM OF the phone caused Job Roberts to turn with a jerk. He crossed the room and picked it up.

"Job?" Narris' voice was raw file against his eardrum.

"Who did you expect, Ev?"

Narris laughed softly. "That was a cruddy stunt, staking me out with the likes of Pete. But it turned into one hell of a comedy, the way the big dummy got away from there

with a dog taking the seat out of his pants."

Roberts said nothing.

Narris' voice dropped to a low, serious pitch. "You won't stop, will you Job? You're hung on this idea that she couldn't have done it to Dolly, that it had to be me. If I can prove that you're wrong, will you stop bugging me? Your loyalty to her and desire to help her are commendable, but misplaced. I want us to clear the air, you and me, because with this persecution bit of an innocent man you're not helping yourself, or me, or her, Job."

Roberts continued to listen without interruption.

"I've something over here to show you, Job. I think it will convince you. I'm counting on your sense of fair play to give me a chance to show you that you're wrong."

"You've waited quite awhile to show me, Ev."

"I didn't know I had this bit of proof for quite awhile. Will you drive over? Now? Settle the thing in your own mind once and for all?"

Roberts was hesitant.

"All right," Narris said tightly. "Damn it, I've tried!"

The decision crystallized in Roberts' mind. "I'll be over, Ev. I'll leave right away."

"Good! The sooner the better. And I'll expect an apology when you see how wrongly you've judged and treated me."

In the master bedroom, Roberts opened the closet and took out his still-damp raincoat. He slipped into the garment and started from the room. At the doorway, he stopped, stood a moment, then crossed to the bedside table.

Opening the drawer, he lifted out the small pistol he'd owned for years. He looked at it a moment, then abruptly thrust it in the pocket of his coat and left the room quickly.

The night was a black ocean with periodic depth charges battering the Eldorado. The headlights struggled feebly. Sweeps of water reduced swinging windshield wipers to impotency.

He drove with his mind more on the other end of the trip than with concern over the elements. Did Narris really have proof of his innocence? Or other motives behind his call? Feeling the weight of the small gun against his thigh, Roberts was glad he'd brought it along.

The car bored to the crest of the short hill close to the Narris turn-off. It poised, then swooped downward, wind and rain rocking it.

Then came one of those hushed instants between the crescendoes of the storm. And an enormous shadow reared out

of the night directly in front of Roberts, just over the brow of the hill. It was a shadow with substance, a tractor-trailer rig that had jackknifed, dropping the front wheels in the ditch beside the shoulder and slewing the trailer to block most of the two-lane road.

He hit the brakes, risking a skid because there was no other way to avert smashing head-on.

The rear end of the Eldorado fishtailed. The road was slicker than grease with oil surfaced from every pore by the water and the water hydroplaning tire treads.

The steering wheel was slack, and the shadow came pouring over Roberts. He braced for the impact, face pulled into a pale white grimace.

The Eldorado laid its left front quarter against the rear wheels of the trailer. Metal crumpled, and the big car rebounded, spinning half way around in the middle of the road. It rocked to rest, hissing steam from a ruptured radiator hose.

Roberts was stunned from a blow of his forehead against the steering wheel ring. He fumbled for the door latch, engaged it with his fingers, and half fell from the car.

He heard quick movement and looked up from his hands-and-knees position. A flick of lightning revealed Narris, scrambling from the place where he'd hidden and waited. Looming over Roberts. Raising a length of heavy metal, like a tire tool, over his head.

A thought of sudden clarity burst through Roberts' fuzzed brain. Narris' call had been bait for a trap. The truck driver had crested the hill, braked, jackknifed. Without doubt he had set out warning flares and headed toward the nearest visible lights, those in Narris' house. Narris had refused help, sending the driver to town where on such a night it would take two hours or more to get equipment out to unditch the cab. Then Narris had called Roberts, hurried to the highway, snuffed out the warning flares, and waited . . .

"You didn't hit it as hard as I'd hoped," Narris said. "But this way may be even better. With your skull cracked and the safety flares relit, somebody will find you, my boy. Maybe the truck driver when he returns. It's going to look like you didn't bother with your seat belt and were thrown from the car to break your head on the pavement. Little accident that should have been minor—but proved fatal."

The weapon in Narris' hand was lifted high, hurtling down, and Roberts had the thought

that surely the bullets were too old, the gun certain to misfire. He squeezed the trigger, barely hearing the muffled explosion in the stormy noise of the night. But he felt the tug against his coat, and he saw Narris staggering back, dropping his weapon and clutching his chest.

Narris tripped, crumpled backward, and struggled to a spread-legged, sitting position. He looked up slowly, rain stinging his face, rivuleting down his slicker, spreading the stain that welled redly just below his neck.

His head wobbling slightly, Narris seemed to be trying hard to bring Robert into focus.

"You sonofabitch," Narris said. "You straight, unbelievable sonofabitch. I knew, finally, it had to be me or you."

He receded into the depths of his thoughts for a moment, and then he began laughing softly. "Madeline, he's cut it now. That's for sure. The cruddy wasp. The very patsy, Madeline, that we figured on for credence and respectability . . ."

XII

THE EARLY SUN spilled through the windows of the small private office in Ridover Sanatarium. The sky outside was clear, the earth washed fresh and clean from the night's torrents.

Eyes puffy from the strain and disillusionment of the past hours, Job Roberts sat slumped in the old leather chair beside the bookcases. Doc Conklin was a big, pink image behind the desk. Near the desk in a hard Windsor chair Noel Latham sat stiffly. He'd made his apologies to Roberts during the night. He was without words for the moment.

As were they all. They sat almost like figures in a waxworks, recrossing a leg now and then, opening a mouth on a gusty sigh.

Then the office door opened, and she was poised there a moment, before two white-starched matrons nudged her all the way. She looked from one to the other of them, until her eyes at last rested on Roberts.

She was the feathery hair, the sooty eyes, the most sensual body Robert had ever known. But she wasn't the same. They knew it, and in a moment, under the power of their eyes, she began to know that they knew it.

"Madeline who?" Noel Latham asked.

She lifted a brow. "I don't understand."

"It's a simple question,

Madeline. I was just asking your last name."

"My name is Jan Harkness," she said.

"We know better than that, my dear," Doc Conklin said. "If necessary we can take you to Asheville. We can explore the records thoroughly, not just the ones Narris produced at the trial, which seemed more than sufficient at the time."

She again looked at Roberts. His inner pain strained his control and shadowed through his face.

She looked away, dropping her gaze to a point someplace on the carpet before the desk.

"I want to see Narris," she said.

"You can't," Latham told her. "He's in the hospital. It's all over, Madeline. Why don't you make it easy on yourself? If you want a lawyer present . . ."

"I know the bit about the civil rights," she said. "Could I have a drink of water?"

Doc Conklin poured from the decanter on the desk and held the glass toward her. She moved forward with that graceful whisper of thigh and calf. Roberts looked at the slim line of her throat as she lifted the water and drank.

"Does Narris claim it was my idea?" she asked.

"Does it matter whose idea it was?" Latham countered.

"No," she said honestly, "I don't suppose it was. I don't suppose I want to go back to Asheville and have you dig it out the hard way, drag it out. I don't suppose I want it that way at all."

"Neither do we," Roberts said, his voice numbed.

She half turned toward him. "Job, would you believe me if I said it wasn't all an act, later when I got to know you? If I said a part of it between you and me was good, better than anything Ive ever known? I don't know how it could be, but it was. I even thought once of asking Ev to call the whole thing off, but I knew he wouldn't. I'd gone too far. I had to see it through. He wouldn't let me back out."

Roberts lowered his head slowly, feeling a mist in his eyes.

"My name is Madeline Lowery," she was saying. "I had specialized psychiatric training and worked at the mental hospital where Jan Harkness was confined. I met Ev Narris a very short time after Jan became a patient. I would see him every time he visited his niece, and sometimes when he came to Asheville and didn't bother to see Jan."

She paused, and the room was very still.

"Jan died almost a year ago,

after a shock treatment one day. I phoned Ev and he drove up. He buried Jan quickly, quietly, telling no one so he could still have an excuse to come up. Dolly never questioned those trips, never wanted to come along.

"The way we were living became intolerable to Ev and me." she said. "With Dolly's money we could own the world. And the plan he worked out seemed so simple, so foolproof."

"To bring you here as Jan," Latham said.

"Yes," she said. "No one here had ever seen the real Jan."

"To stage a scene of violence that night in Pete's place, using Clem Jakes—in a little different way than you were using Job Roberts."

"Yes," she said.

"To make it appear that you—as Jan—had relapsed and taken Dolly's life."

"Yes."

"To have you enter Ridover for treatment and apparently recover in a remarkably short time."

"Yes."

"To have Ev Narris take his so-called niece away when she'd recovered. It would be perfectly plausible, a departure from scenes that held too many unpleasant memories."

"Yes."

"To have you and Narris face a future of unlimited freedom with more money than you could spend in a long lifetime."

"Yes," she said, "that's the way it was to have been."

"But now," Doc Conklin remarked, "your future is quite different. Considering all the facts, I doubt that we could certify you quite sane in the foreseeable future."

Roberts could take no more. He left the downcast group, and walking to his car, drove to a familiar haunt.

The torrent from the night before had washed all the flotsam from the banks of Two Mile creek, and the pool it formed between the shadowing walls of laurel and willow was crystalline clear and clean.

Roberts could not remember the pool having seemed quieter or more gentle. He stood in the shade simply looking at the pool for several long minutes.

He knew that time has healing powers in passing. He knew it would work for him. He would know love with a woman of his own breed one day. They would marry, have kids, face their problems, have their squabbles and know love. It seemed good.

Job Roberts turned and started walking away, knowing that he had seen the pool on Two Mile creek for the last time.

Blaney's life hung by a thread—with only a frail nightclub singer able to rescue him.

BLOOD ON THE SNOW

by HERBERT HARRIS

IT HAD BEEN snowing an hour and the snow lay an inch thick when Jim Blaney—Detective Inspector C.I.D.—was driven out of the town towards an address in the country.

No drive is pleasant when it's snowing. The sort of drive Blaney was taken on is never pleasant in any kind of weather. He was being taken to his execution.

How they would "do" him he didn't know. Or when. Or exactly where. But he would just vanish. And nobody could prove that his fate had anything to do with the shooting of

young Mercer outside the Casa Rubio Club.

In the big black Humber was a man called Greeky, after his birthplace no doubt, and he was driving; Fred, an ex-fighter by the look of his mashed ear and nose; Nick, the principal escort, who was taking Blaney to see The Boss; and Penny, the blonde singer, who was much too pretty to die. . . .

Blaney was sorry about Penny. He didn't hold out much hope for her, unless she bestowed special favours—of the kind she wouldn't want to grant—on Nick or The Boss, whoever the latter might be. Penny had got under his skin, just as she had got under Tom Mercer's. . . .

Young Mercer was very much in Blaney's mind as the car nosed its way beyond the town limits towards the secret rendezvous in the snow-coated countryside. It was the funeral of Tom Mercer that stayed to vividly in his memory. . . .

It was a cold day, with the promise of snow to come, and all the others were leaving the burial-ground when Blaney arrived. So he went alone and stood by Tom Mercer's grave.

"I'll get him, Tom, don't worry," he muttered, not viciously but gently as if Tom had been his younger brother.

He'd been like a brother really. A raw young copper whom the older, wiser Blaney had helped over stiles, steered from the beat to a place in the C.I.D. The kid had had a future.

As Blaney walked slowly away from the grave, he heard the click of a woman's heels. She couldn't see him because he was hidden by some headstones, but Blaney could see the girl plainly enough—a tall well-built blonde in a dark coat who walked with her head bowed.

He watched her put a posy of flowers on Tom's grave. Then he stepped out and walked towards her.

"Oh . . . I didn't see you," she said.

Blaney said: "You knew Tom Mercer?"

The girl nodded and he said: "Very well?"

"No. I hadn't known him long when he was killed. But I liked him better than anyone I'd ever met."

"He was a close chum of mine," Blaney said.

"He came about a week ago to the place where I'm working. We got talking when I'd finished singing. I knew right away I liked him a lot."

Blaney's heart began pounding. "You're a singer at the Casa Rubio Club?"

Her vivid blue eyes swung upon him. "How did you know that?"

"Tom was shot outside the Casa Rubio, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Tears formed in her eyes as she stared at him. "You're a detective, aren't you—a colleague of his?"

He nodded. She interlocked her gloved hands in a gesture of anguish. "I was with him only a few minutes before he died. I heard the shots. I ran out. All I saw was Tom on the pavement."

"You said nothing about this before."

"I was afraid. I didn't know much about Tom, anyway. He came to the Casa Rubio. That night he asked if I could get off early. I fixed it with Nick, the manager. Tom went to wait outside. Then there were the shots. . . ."

Blaney eyed her sympathetically. She said: "You'd have questioned me. I couldn't have helped you. And I had my job to think about."

"The Casa Rubio isn't exactly high-class."

"No, but the job's regular, and I support my kid sister who's still at school."

"By the way, my name's Jim Blaney," he said. "What's yours?"

"Penny Leigh," she told him. "Does it matter?"

"It matters a hell of a lot," he answered. "You're going to help me find Tom's killer."

Driving her away in his own private car, Blaney told her about the lead Sergeant Tom Mercer had been following shortly before his death.

He had traced a number of vice-rackets—drugs, call-girls, crooked gaming clubs—to one focal point. A man who was known simply as The Boss at the Casa Rubio. The owner of the place presumably, but nobody had ever seen him, nobody could say who he was or where he lived.

"I know there's someone called The Boss, but he never comes near the place," Penny said. "Nick Minelli engaged me and pays me and generally runs the club."

"Did Tom tell you he was a policeman?" Blaney asked.

"Yes, but not until the last minute. I had no idea he was trying to get on to something. He seemed to like the club and . . . and me."

Blaney smiled, touched by the gentle sadness in her face. "That's why you're still alive, Penny. They must have trusted you. If they'd thought you were in league with Tom. . . ."

"Oh God, if only I had been!"

"No," he said. "You've still a chance to avenge Tom's death. You're going to take up with another boyfriend . . . me. They're going to find out—through you—that I'm a cop."

"They'll murder you like they did Tom."

"Listen," he went on. "I want you to let Nick know that I'm sick of the police. I want him to know that I'd like to talk to The Boss."

She looked anxious and afraid. "Why must you take this mad risk?"

He grinned ruefully. "Let's say it's for kicks. But, that aside, nobody seems to want to know who The Boss is. Tom tried to find out and thought it worth dying for. I'm taking it from there. Got it?"

"I think I understand," she said. "Tell me what I have to do."

Seeing her in action at the Casa Rubio, Blaney decided that she was the most attractive girl he had ever seen.

Her routine was to move among the tables as she sang, playing up to the men as she went. One of the men she sang to was Blaney, perching on his knee.

On the third night, as she approached his table, he thought she looked pale and strained.

She perched on his lap as usual, tickling the nape of his neck.

"Listen, Jim, there's not much time . . . Nick warned me to keep away from you, but I had to come and tell you . . . they were talking about you . . . they're planning something for you."

A man with a bent nose and flattened ear came from a nearby table and staggered against the blonde singer, wrapping an arm around her. "C'mon, give us a kiss, darling," he said thickly.

The pianist had stopped playing. Penny wrenched herself free, and ran towards an exit. Before the "drunk" turned away he glanced towards Nick Minelli. Blaney saw the latter nod approvingly.

It was obvious the interruption had been staged. It was a cold night and snow had been falling but Blaney could feel the sweat beginning to trickle under his shirt.

They might let him leave, he thought, and follow him. They might even want to take him to meet The Boss. They would *not* shoot him down outside the Casa Rubio, he reckoned. That had happened to Mercer. The club-owner wouldn't have it happen twice.

He collected his hat and coat and went out. The snowflakes were only light now and scarcely bothered him. He turned into the side street where he had left his car, his own private Mini.

A big Humber stood near a side entrance of the Casa

Rubio. Blaney approached it with caution, but it seemed unoccupied.

Then three men suddenly materialized from the passage behind the side entrance.

"Okay, brother," said the biggest, the man with the flattened ear and nose, "this is your taxi."

But Nick Minelli silenced him with a look. "All right, Fred, leave this to me." The club manager turned to the third man, lean and swarthy like himself. "We'd better get going Greeky. Start her up."

Blaney eyed the bulge in the ex-fighter's pocket made by a fist and what must certainly be a gun. He said with an effort at calmness, "I would like to talk to The Boss."

Nick Minelli wore an ugly smile. "So you shall, Inspector."

Suddenly Greeky was pointing. "There's that bird!" he exclaimed.

Fred pivoted round. "It's Penny Leigh. She's behind the car. She's been listening, Nick!"

"Grab her!" Minelli ordered and Fred's free hand shot out. He caught the singer's wrist in a vice-grip, making her whimper with pain.

Blaney's heart sank. He had hoped Penny would be left behind to start any hue-and-cry that she thought necessary.

"Right, let's go to The Boss' place," Minelli said. Something hard prodded against Blaney's hip.

Blaney got in the car, followed by Fred. Greeky turned the nose of the car towards the main road.

"How far's The Boss' place?" Blaney asked.

"A few miles." Minelli spoke across his shoulder.

"It must be in the country then?"

"Yes, Inspector, right by the river. The river's flowing pretty fast and deep at the moment."

Blaney experienced the first really cold clutch of fear. The significance of that comment on the river was unmistakable.

There was a long silence, then Blaney said: "Will I get a chance to talk to The Boss first?"

"You've been talking to him already, you great nit," Minelli said.

"You?" Blaney stared at him in disbelief.

It was clear now. To all the world, save those close to him, Minelli was never anything but Manager. Nick never knew anything because The Boss never told him anything. The Boss being Nick.

"Your friend Mercer told you plenty about my business affairs no doubt?" Minelli said, "As the club's manager, I must say I didn't always approve of

Mr. Minelli's activities, but he was my boss."

Fred and Greeky laughed again. But their laughter died abruptly. All of them could hear suddenly the insistent blare of a police-car siren.

Greeky's eyes were on the mirror. "There's two of 'em, Nick! Gawd knows where they came from! On our tail!" He swung the wheel to take a sharp bend. The Humber slithered crab-wise on the carpet of snow, smacked broadside into the sturdy belly of an oak.

Flashing blue lights stabbed the dark as the police cars screamed to a halt. Fred leapt from the car, firing his gun wildly, but a fist crashed into his face and he went down.

Eight policemen crowded round the others. One said to a colleague, "Swine winged me in the arm—only a flesher luckily." Blood dripped from his wrist to join Fred's blood on the white ground.

The torch of Detective-Constable Hodge swung from face to face, came to rest on Blaney. "Oh, you're still alive, sir. Glad we're in time. You can thank a good friend of yours."

Blaney blinked.

"One of our blokes on the beat got on the blower and said a car passed him with an S.O.S. on the back. The message said 'HELP ME—BLANEY C.I.D.' So we went looking for a Humber with this S.O.S. on its boot-lid . . . written in the snow on the car with a finger."

Blaney looked at Penny with a new admiration. "*You* wrote that message in the snow?"

She smiled. "I like writing on steamy windows, too," she said.

MIKE SHAYNE Presents — Next Month's Short Stories

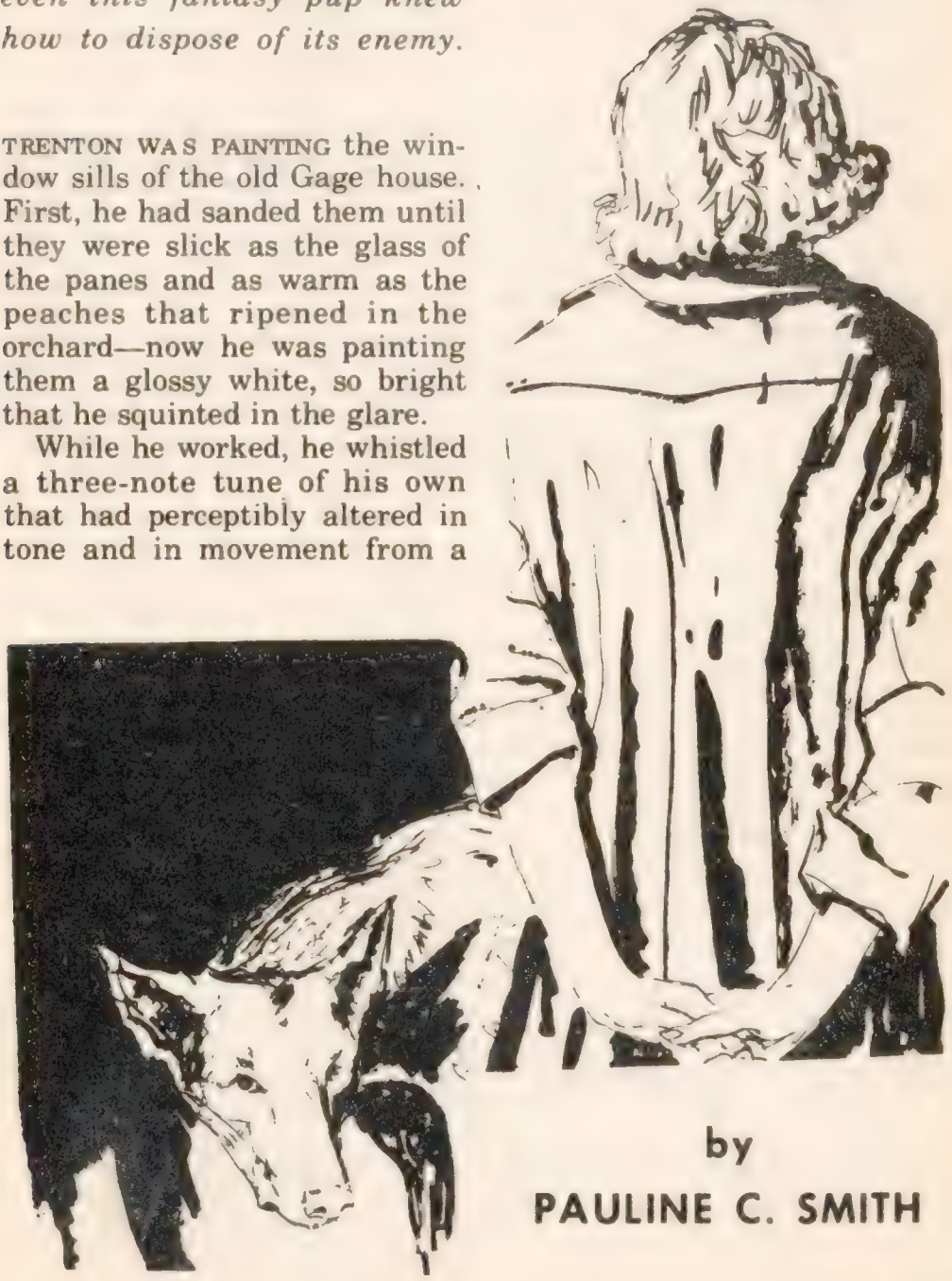
LOOK BEFORE YOU SHOOT
by ROBERT HOSKINS

DEATH IS MY PASSENGER
by CHARLES RUNYON

DO NOT FOLD, SPINDLE OR MUTILATE
by MARCIA K. BROWN

THE DOG

The animal existed only in Trenton's imagination—but even this fantasy pup knew how to dispose of its enemy.



by
PAULINE C. SMITH

TRENTON WAS PAINTING the window sills of the old Gage house. First, he had sanded them until they were slick as the glass of the panes and as warm as the peaches that ripened in the orchard—now he was painting them a glossy white, so bright that he squinted in the glare.

While he worked, he whistled a three-note tune of his own that had perceptibly altered in tone and in movement from a

lilt of joy to a dirge of lamentation. Trenton was lonely—not with the momentary hollow of exclusion, but with a cavernous pit in his chest, suddenly dug deep.

Leaving the can of paint on the ladder ledge with the brush dripping from its rim, Trenton crawled down the ladder and crouched in the grass, overwhelmed by his isolation, despairing in his need.

Rosemary locked the gate of the lumberyard, slipped the key in her pocket, looked up at the weatherbeaten GAGE LUMBER sign above the office building, thinned her lips in a self-satisfied smile, stepped from the driveway to the lawn next door, where she picked up the evening paper and walked the path toward the gray house with the shining white windowsills.

As she rounded the corner, she first noted Trenton's bowed figure of sorrow at the foot of the ladder. Then, raising her eyes, she saw the paint-crusted brush drying against the open can.

"Trenton," she said.

He lifted his head.

"You haven't finished your work."

He struggled to his feet and, unfolding, stood a head taller than she. "Rosemary. . ."

"Don't dawdle now. And don't forget to clean up the paintbrush when you're through."

She strode toward the back of the house.

"*Rosemary!*" he called after her.

"Cap the paint can tightly and put the ladder in the shed," she flung over her shoulder. In the kitchen, she shook her head with philosophical acceptance, thinking how the boy had to be prodded. Let him get his mind diverted from a job and he had to be reminded, led back, explained to. She smiled with conciliatory compromise, laid down the paper, plucked the gate key from her pocket, hung it on the wall hook, washed her hands antiseptically clean and set about to prepare the evening meal.

Rosemary and Trenton, sister and brother, were the last of the Gages, Rosemary being the head of the household and the head of the lumber company. She did not take her responsibilities lightly, neither the household burden that had crashed down upon her at the age of 24 when her mother, too old for such an ordeal, gave birth to the second child, Trenton, and died from it; nor the other, the business load that descended two years later at the death of her father.

"Take care of the baby," her mother had whispered.

"Yes, Ma, I will, Ma." And she had. The child was slow to walk, faltering in his steps and slow to talk, halting in his speech, but tractable under the tireless direction of his sister.

"Take care of the lumber company," ordered her father during his last attack.

"I will, Pa."

"You're a smart girl, you will manage."

"I'll do my best, Pa."

And she had. Day in and day out, she had toted the baby to the lumber company, penned him up in a corner of the office, talked to him and taught him between customers and the bookwork—and it had all come out right. Trenton learned to walk, talk and do the chores she set him to.

He picked the peaches in the orchard and learned to can them—the basement was full of pickled peaches, preserves and jam. He helped to lift heavy 4 x 4's on trucks and stack the plywood and mend the roof and paint and mow the lawn and scrub the floors. He was a good boy and never once did she resent the motherhood thrust upon her or the life style patterned for her because of his birth.

Rosemary set the kitchen table, turned the chops, poked the potatoes, whipped up a shortcake and opened a jar of peaches while she paid attention to the identifiable outdoor sounds. She could hear that Trenton had finished the sill and dragged the ladder back to the shed. She could hear his gentle taps securing the lid of the paint can and she smiled because the sills were painted and the boy, her brother, was a good boy, the result of her resolute training.

The screen clattered behind him.

"All finished, Trenton?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Well then, supper's almost ready. Go wash up."

He went.

Theirs was an ordered, methodical, neat, tidy life, organized into a sterile design with all the days and the hours systematically accounted for.

She told him at dinner that he had done a fine job. "I could see the white sills from the roadway," she complimented. "You do very nice work."

Trenton beamed while he mashed and stirred his potato and gravy into a pale tan mixture.

Rosemary was fond of the boy. Looking across the table at him, her eyes avoiding the mess on his plate, she thought how much younger than sixteen his round cherubic face appeared, yet how mature was his

muscular frame. She had taught him well, had reared him with stern kindness so that he did her bidding willingly and with amiable efficiency—thus Rosemary counted her compensations at least once a day.

After dinner, as usual, Trenton scraped, washed, rinsed, dried and put away the dishes. Then he swept the kitchen floor while Rosemary read the evening paper, rocking to news of the town—a concert, a bridge party, a fire, accident, burglary and arrest. She relaxed as she contemplated her own routine existence with no ups and no downs, one which had achieved a level of monotony that was peaceful and unconfused.

Trenton was a good boy, she hadn't missed a thing and the lumber business, as good as most businesses these days, provided a living. Rosemary rocked, reminding herself that hers was a good life—neat, clean, orderly and pleasant. She smiled at Trenton as he came into the room.

"Did you finish the dishes?" she asked unnecessarily.

He said he had and had put them away, closed the cupboard doors, swept the kitchen floor and locked the door. He walked to the TV set and turned to Channel 2. He knew, as if the TV programs were printed on his tune-in fingers, which series and which channels they watched each evening. He switched programs by rote and by memory, almost as good as a remote channel selector—better as a compromise, thought Rosemary, for he was her brother, her son by inheritance.

The evening passed as had all others before it until the last commercial before the conclusion of the program—a dog food commercial that "hits the spot with Spot." Smiling words—frisking pup—causing Trenton to jerk forth from his straightback chair, hands dangling between his knees, fingers stretching toward the image on the screen, remembering now his afternoon trauma of lonely dejection and feeling again the longing that dug its way into his chest with, at last, a label of desire.

The commercial had ended. The private eye, with sweeping aplomb, was tying up loose ends as Trenton turned toward Rosemary, twisting his fingers between his knees, and exploded, "Rosemary, I want a dog."

"Sssh!" She attempted to silence him without taking her eyes from the screen.

"A puppy. I'll call him Spot. 'Here, Spot,' I'll call and he'll come running. I'll teach him things. 'Roll over, Spot,' I'll say

and he'll roll. 'Sit up, Spot,' and up he'll sit." Trenton was choking with the laughter of fantasy fulfillment.

"*Sssh*," hissed Rosemary—too late. The screen darkened, credits crawled to a background of crashing music. "*There!*" she snapped as she rose. "You made me miss the last part." Immediately then, to compensate for her irritability, she patted his head, told him to turn off the television set like a good boy and get ready for bed.

"Can I?" asked Trenton as he turned off the set and she switched off the lamp.

"Can you what?" asked Rosemary.

"Can I have a dog?" he asked in the darkness. He wished to explain the empty place he had found in his chest just today and his desire to fill it with a dog, but the words were too much and the sentiment too difficult to convey.

"A *dog*?" cried Rosemary as she switched on the stairway light. She laughed. "*You* don't want a dog." She marched up the stairs before him.

He hurried after, stumbling in his haste and stammering with eagerness, attempting to explain how very much he wanted a dog.

"All right, Trenton," said his sister at the top of the stairs. "You go into the bathroom

first." She entered and closed her bedroom door.

Trenton lay awake a long time, thinking about the dog, that night, the dog that Rosemary might allow him to have as soon as she really heard his pleas. Rosemary often did not hear—he realized this—or, if she heard, it was the tops of the words only, the edges of meaning. If he could say it right, catch her attention and hold it—if he could make her hear and understand the way he

heard the call of understanding. . .He would try—he made it a resolution—he would try and try again.

The spotted pup curled in the cavern of his chest, hopefully waiting.

HE TRIED at breakfast. "Rosemary," he said.

"You'd better wash the windows today," she suggested. "Don't slop now."

"Rosemary, about the dog—"

"And listen for the Guttmeier truck when it comes into the lumberyard. I'll want you to help load on some two-by-fours."

At noon, he prepared a roast beef sandwich, the meat sliced thin the way Rosemary liked it with a crisp leaf of lettuce and cut across from corner to corner. He wrapped it snugly in a sheet of waxed paper, heated the coffee, poured it into a thermos and took it over to the lumberyard office.

"Did you use the roast beef?" Rosemary asked him.

"Yes," he said. "Rosemary."

"Sliced thin? Cut carefully?"

"Rosemary!"

"Good boy. Coffee hot?"

"Rosemary!"

"There!" She stood to look out the window. "There's the Guttmeier truck. Go on out, Trenton, and be sure you load on the two by four's stacked over by the fence. The seconds. Hear?"

He tried again at suppertime. "Rosemary," he said as he piled his peas and carrots neatly and separately from the chop on his plate.

"The windows look nice," she complimented. "You did a good job, Trenton."

He raced through the dishes, hoping to catch her attention before the first TV program of the evening. But unfortunately, racing, a dish slipped from his hands and shattered to the floor. This unnerved Rosemary, causing a spate of minor petulance as well as specific orders as to getting every splinter, every shard of china, off the linoleum. "Dampen a paper towel and get every piece now." There was no time left to ask for a dog before the TV programs began.

He tried at ten o'clock, going-to-bed time, as he climbed the stairs. "Rosemary," trying to catch her attention, "you know that dog—"

"I want you to dig a garden plot on the west side of the house tomorrow, Trenton. Dig it deep, now, and chop up the clods and rake it smooth. It's time we got the vegetable seeds in." She entered the bathroom and closed the door.

So it went.

Each time Trenton wrapped

his thoughts up in words and made an attempt at pronouncement, Rosemary came up with an order, laid down a rule, wearily scolded or automatically complimented him so that he swallowed his thoughts and the words curled around the spotted dog in the cavern of his chest.

It was not until the carrots feathered, the radish leaves grew tall and the lettuce began to head that Rosemary heard his plea. "I want a dog," he cried in anguish. "I want a dog, Rosemary. *I want a dog*!"

She looked down upon him as he knelt between the clean, green rows. "A dog?" she said with disbelief. "A *dog*?" "Of course you don't want a dog. What would you do with a dog?"

He leaped to his feet and started eagerly toward her. "I would play with him, Rosemary. I'd talk to him," he cried, heavy heels unknowingly crunching curly balls of lettuce, grinding carrot plumes into the soil.

"Trenton!" she screamed, "You're *ruining* the garden!"

He leaped, looked down at disaster, stammeringly promised to fix it, to replant, but Rosemary must understand how greatly he wanted a dog, how deeply he needed one. He told her of the pit in his chest stirring with the desire of a spotted puppy dog.

Rosemary stood stiff, staring at and around him, allowing him to pour forth the words that had been forming for so long into sounds of covetous hope. She let him say it all and then, as he bent forward in mute expectation, she answered him.

"Now you repair the mess you've made of this garden while I go in and prepare supper."

Halfway to the house, she stopped, looked back and added, "You may not have a dog. They are filthy, vicious and unpredictable. It would dirty up the house and dirty up the yard." As he raised his hands in initial protest, she finished with finality, "It would dig up the garden and I cannot have any more of that. Not another word about a dog. Do you understand?"

In the kitchen, Rosemary told herself it was not because she had an antipathy toward animals or a resentment against orphaned brothers that she would not allow Trenton his dog. Oh, my no! Her reasons were exactly as stated. Dogs were filthy, vicious and unpredictable, therefore it took a strong and sensible hand to raise one—certainly not Trenton's hand, since he himself

was still in the process of being raised.

Rosemary slammed the door of the refrigerator. Not that she resented the vested task. No, no, no—but she could not take care of boy, business and a dog, too. That was asking too much, way above and beyond the call of duty. She opened the refrigerator door again, found and brought forth a coffee can of bacon grease, closed the door gently, spooned the grease into an iron kettle and set it to heat, quickly pared two potatoes and cut them in uniform strips. . .she had decided to make French fried potatoes for Trenton, who loved them, and broiled liver, which he hated but which was good for him.

She was glad now that the subject of the dog was out and settled, having known something was bugging him and being somewhat concerned that, at sixteen, it might be a problem with which she could not cope. But a dog—and she smiled her thin-lipped smile—well, that was a beast of a different color.

Trenton thought the dog had died, so still did it lie in the shadows of his empty chest. He closed his eyes tightly when the dog-food commercial frisked across the screen, and escaped into quick sleep in his bed each night. By day, he did Rosemary's bidding—stacking lumber into neat piles, preparing her lunches with cross-cornered sandwich cuts, picking the first of the peaches to transform into glowing jars of jam.

He never thought of the dog—not once—not until the second planting of vegetables had sprouted lush and flourished green. It was then, as he hoed the furrows clean of weeds that a terrible and wonderful miracle occurred. He paused to wipe the sweat from his brow and glance back in contemplation of work he had already finished and froze in startled dismay at the havoc that met his eyes.

He could not believe it as he twisted and dropped to his knees and brushed his hands over the disordered soil of a demolished garden. Shallow holes and deeper pits honeycombed the once neat vegetable rows, scattering carrots, beets, radishes and onions in broken confusion.

Trenton knelt and crawled in a frantic attempt to push the earth even with the palms of his hands, patting and smoothing. . .it looked as if a dog had invaded the garden, a zealously playful puppy to dig with capricious abandon. He rocked back on his heels and then it was that he saw Spot, faintly at

first, frisking, clawing at the soil, materializing gradually until the pup became so clear that Trenton called a tentative name with soft hesitation and laughed with delight when the puppy leaped to wobbling attention and lurched into his arms.

WHAT HAPPENED here?" screamed Rosemary.

Trenton looked up and saw her at last.

"What have you done to the garden?"

He loosened his arms, allowing his pet to tumble to soft earth, where it rolled and scrambled up on short legs, wagging its tail.

"Answer me!" screamed Rosemary.

"He couldn't help it. He didn't mean to," cried Trenton in alarm. "Did you?" he asked the pup, who looked up at Rosemary and offered a polite bark of apology.

"See?" cried Trenton. "He's telling you so."

"I want to know what happened here. Why is this garden all torn up and the vegetables ruined?"

The puppy growled and lunged at her, playfully fierce, landing hunched on its chest, throat threatening war, small rump high, tail wagging a flag of truce.

"Trenton!" screamed Rosemary.

"Come back here," called Trenton. The pup whirled and scampered to the protection of his master's arms.

Tearfully, cheek nuzzled against the little dog's soft warm coat, the boy told his sister how it had happened. He hadn't heard a thing while hoeing the weeds until, when he paused to look back, there they were, the holes in the garden, the leaves strewn, and the little dog, Spot, hard to see under a shower of dirt.

"He's so little," Trenton explained, "he doesn't know yet he's not supposed to dig holes." He looked up and withered under Rosemary's contempt and her skeptical gaze.

She shook with anger at the ruin of the garden and stiffened with the insult of Trenton's outrageous excuse for the ruination. She stamped her foot and turned on her heel with the words: "If you have done this in a tantrum over not being allowed a dog, if this is your way to get a dog—forget it. You will fix that garden and replant it. . ."

"I will," Trenton called after her. "Oh, I will, Rosemary. And I'll teach Spot not to dig those holes again."

She stopped dead, half-turned and looked back, her face fro-

zen, her eyes icy. She held her breath to the count of eight, then in a carefully controlled voice, she said, "Shut up about your make-believe dog. I've had enough of it and enough of you." Quickly then, she walked around a corner of the house to the kitchen.

The idea, the very idea of him laying all the blame for all that mess out there on a dog that didn't exist! And expecting her to believe it! It was not that she resented the boy, she again assured herself—after all, he was her duty and her commitment. However—and she clicked her teeth in frustration—however, she was getting pretty damned tired.

She yanked open the refrigerator door and peered in. What for supper, she wondered, and decided on squash—she would make a squash casserole—nothing else, just a squash casserole. Trenton hated squash. Her lips curved again in a thin-lipped smile. It would be good for him.

Spot frisked around Trenton's feet as he raked the demolished garden. "She doesn't see you," he said to the dog, "she didn't even hear you. Speak, Spot." The dog barked and the boy leaned down to pat his head. "But never mind, she's that way with me," he comforted. "She only sees what I do and then she tells me I did it good or I'd better do it over."

He laughed ruefully. "She sure saw what you did and she sure didn't like it. Now you sit over there in that far corner—see where that stake is?" The dog looked and nodded. "Well, you go over there and let me get on with this. I'll get it all raked and save what I can and then tomorrow, when we're all alone, I'll replant the parts that need replanting."

The dog trotted over to the stake and sat down. He was a good dog, thought Trenton, all he needed was learn the rules. Then maybe Rosemary would notice him.

But Rosemary did not notice the dog.

Even after the garden was fixed up and Spot learned to behave himself, she behaved as if there were no dog there, romping about but keeping out of her way, sitting quietly next to Trenton's chair each evening during television time, chin on paws, eyes looking up from under fringed lids at the exciting parts of the programs, closed in sleep during the commercials.

Trenton was sorry Rosemary refused to see and therefore did not acknowledge Spot. At first, after she told him to shut up about the dog, he had dutifully shut up about the dog. But later, once Spot became so well

trained he could not resist pointing out the dog's achievements, he again tried to catch her attention.

"Look, Rosemary," he'd cry out. Then to the dog, "Sit up, Spot." with a snap of his fingers. "Look at that, Rosemary." She would look without seeing, frown with impatience and say with cold anger, "Stop that nonsense."

Rosemary's disregard made things difficult. When they went into town to the grocery store, she threw out cans of dog food as quickly as Trenton slipped them into the cart. This worried him, having watched the dog food commercials on television and having learned the value of a well-balanced diet. He only hoped the scraps from the table would be a reasonable substitute and suffice.

The dog grew and thrived none the less.

"Look how he's grown, Rosemary," Trenton would say, patting the dog's filled-out sides.

"Shut up," she'd answer.

"He's getting big. Just feel him."

"Knock it off."

Rosemary was growing increasingly weary of Trenton's fantasy dog. The animal was everywhere—under the table, on the chairs, scampering here, loping there, standing up, sitting down.

"I taught Spot to bring in the paper."

Rosemary thinned her lips and banged a pan.

It wasn't that she resented Trenton. After all, he was a moral obligation, her brother, a son under duress—but she did resent the dream he had brought into this house to take over their lives.

"Watch out, Rosemary! You'll stumble over Spot."

"Oh, for God's sake!" she cried, with an involuntary sidestep.

She was tired. She had raised this brother-son through the diaper and colic stage, pushed and hauled him to walk at last, laboriously instructed him through word sounds and vocalized meanings. She had taught him to become a functional, workable part of a household-business she had inherited against her will. . .and without resentment, all the way through, without resentment—except that now the dog was too much and she was tired. She wanted to get rid of the dog.

"I gave Spot a bath today. Doesn't he look nice?"

"My God!" she breathed, raised her eyes ceilingward and turned her back.

She gave a brief thought to

substituting the make-believe with a real live dog, immediately discarded with a shudder. If she could not tolerate fantasy, she would be unable to live with reality.

ROSEMARY LOCKED the gate of the lumberyard and slipped the key into her pocket without glancing up at the GAGE LUMBER sign above the office building. She picked her way through roadside weeds, dry now at the end of summer, and across the lawn. She took no notice of the garden, sparsely green at season's end, still damp from the day's sprinkling.

She walked around the house to the back door. There she saw the folded newspaper at the top of the stairs. That damn dog and his fetching ways! she thought in sudden anger.

She climbed the stairs to the porch with weary steps, reached the top and stooped to pick up the paper.

"Rosemary," called Trenton from the screen door, his voice high and full of alarm, "don't touch the paper. I'm teaching Spot to guard it."

Still stooped, she screamed, "The dog again, the goddam dog! *I'll* teach the dog a thing or two!" She beat the wooden porch floor with clenched fists.

"Rosemary, be *careful*. He'll *bite* you."

She straightened, panting. "I'll *teach* him. I'll teach the cur."

She drew back her leg, jabbed a vicious kick through air and swayed off balance. She screamed. Arms outstretched and wildly flying, she toppled down the stairs and lay in a still heap on the walk below.

Trenton slammed through the screen door. "*Spot!*" he shouted, "Come away. Come back. Come here." He crouched and clapped his hands over his eyes.

The dog, cringing, crawled on its belly up the stairs, looking up at the boy with eyes of shame.

Trenton opened the screen door. "In the house," he ordered. He led the dog to his room and gestured toward the bed. "Stay there," he instructed, "until I get back." The dog dropped its bloody nose to its paws and Trenton closed the door.

He walked to the back door and down the porch steps and, with face averted, reached out his hand for the lumberyard key in Rosemary's pocket, the key that would get him inside the office to a phone. But he could not do it—he could not touch her—there was too much blood.

So he started down the road to town, planning as he went,

how he would tell about Rosemary and glancing back at the house, worried about leaving Spot alone.

"WHAT DID she die of?"

"Heart," said the doctor. "Massive heart attack. I figure it caught her at the top of those back steps of hers and she was dead when she reached the bottom."

"But the kid. When he come walkin' into town ravin' about a dog clawin' the bejeezus out of his sister, I thought there'd be blood all over the place. And then when I seen her, there she was, all curled up and peaceful, looking like she was asleep."

"Well, the boy was in a state of shock," said the doctor. "He didn't know what it was he saw or what it was he was saying."

They didn't let Trenton go home for three days!

Not until after the funeral, everybody said.

They talked about the house and the lumberyard and how he was underage and couldn't take care of things himself—while he worried about Spot. They talked about the courts and a guardian, or a home, not meaning home—and he wondered if Spot would stay right there on the bed where he had left him. They talked about Rosemary and how she had died a quick death and he should be thankful for that—and he worked up scolding words in his mind to be delivered to Spot.

Two cars drove out to the house, the car that had the people in it who would take care of him, and the doctor's car in which he rode. He could hardly wait. He didn't listen when it was explained to him that more permanent arrangements would be made through the courts.

There was the house!

The doctor drove right up over the lawn and through the garden that now looked dry and unkempt. The other car followed.

Trenton jumped out and ran up the steps to the back door. Someone must have locked it. He grappled with the knob, twisted and pulled when a hand reached over his shoulder, inserted the key and turned it and the door flew open.

Trenton raced through the kitchen and down the hall and up the stairs and threw open his bedroom door. The bed was smooth and empty. He looked under the bed and in the closet. He looked under the bureau. He even opened the drawers and searched. He stumbled to the window and pulled back the curtains.

A corner of the screen was ripped from the frame. He

rubbed his brow and tried to think—had the screen been torn before or had Spot clawed his way to freedom?

Spot was gone!

He threw himself to the bed and wept, crouched over a stain on the bedspread—a brown stain, like blood that has dried and become old.

He rubbed the stain with caressing fingers and felt his chest empty, once again a cavern of loneliness.

NEXT MONTH'S TWO GREAT HEADLINERS:

MURDER AFTER MIDNIGHT

The New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

If Evelyn Ireland had not been so beautiful, the Miami private eye might not have accepted what has to be his most embarrasing case. Nor is his embarrassment helped by the fact that clearing Evelyn's son of murder turns out to be among the most dangerous Shayne has ever faced.

SUMMER OF VENGEANCE

A Sensational New Novelet

by JERRY JACOBSON and SONNY ALVAREZ

Four other young Puerto Ricans perished in the incendiary blaze that destroyed beautiful, rich Casandra Gonzales. It was Captain Abe Diaz's job to supervise the tracking of a murderer who seemed to come out of nowhere.

BEACH PARTY

by JAMES HOLDING

Subtle poisons may work very well—as long as the victim remains in ignorance.

TWENTY MINUTES AFTER the ambulance took Henry Porter away, the party broke up and the Hendersons were left alone on the dark beach beside the embers of their dying fire.

Around them, the beach was littered with the pathetic debris of what, only half an hour before, had been one of the Hendersons' usual lively beach parties. Ice buckets, beer cans, unburned firewood, the skewers used to roast the wieners, the coolers and containers in which the picnic supper had been transported to the beach—all lay where they had been drop-

ped when Henry Porter became ill.

Roger Henderson, half-reclining on one elbow in the sand, gazed into the fire and spoke above the murmurous sound of lapping Gulf waves. "If there's any scotch left, Claire, I could sure use a stiff belt about now."

His wife handed him the bottle from the leather liquor kit. "You'll have to drink it warm. The ice is gone."

Roger held up the bottle against the fire's light. "Plenty of whiskey left, anyhow," he said. "Most of our guests drank beer, thank God."

Claire said indignantly, "Stop it! How can you be so—so—*normal* after what just happened to poor Henry?"

Roger uncapped the scotch bottle and tilted it. "Poor Henry. That's right—poor Henry!"

Something in his voice made Claire say, "Aren't you sorry he was taken ill, Roger? Aren't you worried about him?"

"He's in good hands. The young fellows on the ambulance seemed to know their business."

"I know. But lots of times when people get heart attacks, they don't get *over* them. They—they die. I know you didn't like Henry very much, Roger, but you can at least hope he'll be all right, can't you?"

Roger tilted the bottle and took a long swallow. Then he looked solemnly and in silence for a moment at his wife's face, made rosy by the reflected glow of the dying fire. Hers was a fragile, almost etherial beauty. Roger still found it as irresistible as when they first met. Something seemed to twist inside his chest every time he looked into Claire's eyes.

He said quietly, "Do I hope Henry gets well? No, Claire—I don't."

"Roger! What a heartless thing to say!"

He shrugged. "I can't feel very concerned about a man who's been trying to steal my wife."

Claire raised her eyebrows. "You're being ridiculous."

"*Am* I?"

"You certainly are!"

Roger uttered a short laugh. "Do you deny that Henry Porter is in love with you?"

"Of course, I deny it. And *I'm* certainly not in love with *him*." When her husband said nothing, Claire went on, "Henry and I are—are *simpatico*, Roger. We have a lot of the same interests. Like art and gourmet cooking and—you know. We—we get along well together, that's all."

"That's a nice way of putting it," Roger said. "I *like* that. You 'get along well together'!" He

lifted the bottle and swallowed the last mouthful of scotch it contained. "You're using the wrong tense, Claire."

"Tense?"

"You and Henry *got* along well together. Past tense, see?"

Claire angrily brushed sand from the knee of her jeans, stood up and walked a little away. She said, "I refuse to stop seeing him!" she flared. "Just because you are vulgar enough to suspect—"

Roger interrupted her. "That isn't what I meant, Claire."

"What *did* you mean, then?"

"Merely that your poor Henry is past tense himself by now. At least, I imagine so."

Her eyes widened. "You mean—dead?"

He nodded.

"Lots of people get over heart attacks."

"Henry didn't *have* a heart attack," Roger said.

She stared at him.

"And if poor old Henry is now dead, as I suspect, he didn't *die* from a heart attack, angel."

"But the ambulance men said. . ." she began.

He waved her to silence and tossed the empty scotch bottle away into the circle of darkness beyond the firelight. The whiskey had loosened the tensions in him, brought things into softer focus, given him an urge to confide in somebody—to celebrate his cleverness by telling about it. After all, it was Claire's party as well as his. Henry Porter had been her guest as well as his. And a wife couldn't testify against her husband, he reflected tipsily. So why not?

"Don't you understand, Claire?" he said, smiling. "Henry Porter was murdered."

She looked at him for the space of a held breath before she decided that he was speaking seriously—or thought he was. "Now you're being *utterly* ridiculous," she said. "Henry was standing right there alone beside this fire"—she pointed—"when the attack hit him. Nobody touched him or was even close to him until he collapsed in the sand and we all ran to help him."

"He was murdered," Roger repeated.

She sniffed her disbelief. "By whom?"

"By me," said Roger, trying to conceal the surge of pride he felt. "Poor old Henry got it from your dumb complacent husband, that's who!"

"Roger, you're drunk," she said in disgust. "Help me clean up this mess and let's go home."

"*Ah*!" said Roger with the air of a man whose wife has just paid him a rare compliment. "You didn't know what a clever

man you married, did you, Claire? What a clever, well-read husband you possess!" He paused dramatically. "Shall I tell you how I managed to murder Mr. Romeo Porter with whom, by your own admission, you got along so well?"

She said, "Shut *up*, Roger!"

It was hard for him to make out her expression beyond the embers, but he elected to read shock and fear in it and went on solicitously, "But please don't be frightened, dear. I killed Henry in such a way that they'll never in a million years prove it was anything but an accident. They'll never be able to pin it on me. Or on you, either, if it comes to that."

"On *me*?" Claire echoed. "You *are* a drunken fool, Roger!"

"*You* were the one who was intimate with Henry, darling. *You* were the one who was carrying on behind your faithful husband's back. *You* were the one who might very well have wanted to get rid of tiresome old Henry. So it's remotely possible you might be suspected of his murder, you know. Anyway, aren't you interested in how I killed him?"

"I can't begin to tell you how interested I am!" Claire's sarcasm was monumental. It pleased Roger.

"Well," he said, "I arranged to kill your Henry with a laughably ordinary weapon. No gun, no knife, no karate chop. Just a lowly hot dog."

Claire frowned. "You poisoned Henry, you mean?"

"Exactly—with a lowly hot dog." Roger paused as though expecting applause. When none was forthcoming, he went on, "And furthermore, I never even *touched* the hot dog before he ate it. Didn't go anywhere near the box of wieners all evening. Don't you find that remarkably clever of me?"

Claire said nothing, merely gazing at him as though he had suddenly become demented.

"In any event," Roger continued, "I will now explain how I was able to poison Henry Porter with a hot dog without even touching the murder weapon itself. But first, I must call your attention, ladies and gentlemen, to something I said about myself but a moment ago. I boasted that I was 'well-read'. Do you remember that? *Well-read*. A choice of words, Claire, that was not without significance. Don't you want to know what its significance was?"

"I'm dying of curiosity," Claire's voice dripped acid. "Tell me."

"Very well." Roger, from his semi-reclining position in the sand, gave her a sketchy half-bow. "I am, as you know, an omniverous reader of mag-

azines. And it was in one of our magazines that I recently read about the unusual murder method I used to scuttle poor Henry." He was drawing it out, deriving intense pleasure from his recital. "The magazine was one on family health. And the article I read in it was one that warned us all to beware of poisonous shrubs—specifically of the beautiful, sweet-smelling, innocent-looking oleander, which is enormously lethal. Did you know that, Claire?"

Claire said, "Oleander? You poisoned Henry with oleander? There aren't any oleander bushes here."

"True. There was, however, one hot dog skewer made of an oleander branch among all those other skewers I cut for you today, darling. One—just one skewer, pilfered from our neighbor's oleander bush, Claire. All the other skewers were harmless pin-oak branches. But not the one old Henry used to toast his hot dog." Roger wagged his head with mock sadness. "*That* was prime oleander wood.

"I know, because I handed it to him myself when the time came for toasting hot dogs." Roger made a long arm, reached for the liquor kit and drew a half-finished bottle of bourbon from it. He uncapped the bottle and took a swig of the bourbon. "They say it doesn't matter if you mix your drinks," he explained. "It's just the total amount of alcohol that counts."

Claire peered across the fire at her husband and shivered. "Put some more wood on the fire," she said. "I'm getting chilly."

"*You* do it," he answered. "You're closer."

The fire blazed up when she threw on fresh fuel. A light breeze from the Gulf sent the smoke in tatters around Roger's head. As though there had been no interruption, he went on, "This magazine article said that oleander twigs, leaves and flowers contain chemicals that act like digitalis but are far more toxic—that using an oleander branch as a skewer to roast meat over an open fire can transfer a fatal dose of poison from the skewer to the meat. *Now* do you get it, Claire?" Roger laughed with more than a touch of alcoholic shrillness in the laugh.

"I get it, all right," Claire said flatly, and shivered again in spite of the fire.

Roger waved smoke away with his hand and coughed. "You want to know what happened to your Henry before he died, Claire? Or what's happening to him right this minute if

he isn't dead yet? Severe cardiac irregularities, abdominal pain, nausea, dizziness, slowed pulse, hypotension, hypothermia, cyanosis, convulsions, respiratory paralysis." Roger reeled them off with a giggle. "That sounds like enough to kill almost anyone, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "Even you, Roger." She stood up and brushed sand from the seat of her dungarees, again moving away a little.

"*Me*?" he muttered. He fumbled ineffectually at the bourbon bottle, coughing.

"Yes, Roger—*you*! The clever, clever Roger Henderson. You *fool*!" Suddenly Claire's tone was scathing. "I *saw* you cutting that oleander switch this morning. And I guessed what you had in mind for Henry Porter. Because *I* read the same article *you* did!

"Oh, yes, you *are* remarkably clever, darling. But not quite clever enough to know that *both* you and Henry Porter have bored me out of my mind with your selfish, jealous, disgusting love! If you want the truth, Roger, I am deliriously happy—deliriously!—to get rid of both of you, once and for all!"

Roger coughed in the smoke from the fire. His fingers relaxed their hold on the bottle of whiskey. He squinted up painfully at Claire's beautiful, pitiless face and tried to say something, but the words were smothered by his cough.

Conversationally, Claire asked from the other side of the fire, "Do you remember what else that article said, Roger—that *inhaling* the smoke of burning oleander can be fatal, too?" She laughed, a silvery tinkle of sound on the quiet beach. "Whether you know it or not, that's what you've been breathing since I built up the fire, Roger. You aren't the only one who can steal oleander boughs from the neighbors." She looked down at him.

"I'm going to call the ambulance again, Roger. Two fatal accidents in one evening, isn't that sad?" She twiddled her fingers at him, noting with impersonal pleasure the incredulous, horrified look on his face, now twisting in agony. "Don't go away until I get back."

She strode off into the darkness.

Two police officers intercepted her five feet beyond the circle of firelight. Approaching silently through the muffling sand, they had arrived in time to overhear her final remarks.

Later, at her trial, she learned how they happened to be there. The ambulance attendant who watched Henry Porter die en route to the hospital had read the oleander article, too.

THE GIRL IN THE YELLOW BIKINI

Watching a beautiful girl is a harmless hobby—unless the girl is named Irene White—or is it Iris Wright? If she is, look out!

by

PHILIP M. MARGOLIN

I WON'T SAY that sex had nothing to do with it. After all, it was her body that first attracted me to her. I can still remember the bikini. It was yellow. The bottom was very skimpy and the two halves were joined by a plastic ring that let a little bit of tanned hip show through. Very tantalizing. But, as I said, sex wasn't the main thing.

Boredom and loneliness had a lot more to do with it. My wife had recently walked out on me after six years of marriage. Quitting my job had precipitated the final quarrel, but I think she would have left even if I had stayed with the firm. The business of the job was a convenient excuse.

Losing Kathy had shot my

self-confidence to hell. I was afraid to jump back into the dating game and I didn't have a job to take my mind off my problems. And it was summer. The net result was that I moped around the house with T.V. and paperback novels for company. And that is how the game started.

I didn't see her move in, because I was in Los Angeles on a job interview. My house is on a hill and it is at least one house in height above the houses on the other side of the street. The Evans house had been vacant for a month.

It was small and had a nice front lawn surrounded by a hedge that provided privacy from all eyes save mine. Having a house well above street level is a definite advantage if your new neighbor happens to be an attractive young lady who likes to sunbathe in a skimpy yellow bikini.

I was standing by my front window when she walked out of the house. She seemed so cool and self-possessed. If she had seen me standing there, I don't think it would have fazed her. She had a blanket and suntan lotion in one hand and a magazine in the other. She flicked the blanket out in a lazy arc several times until it was lying just right. Then she sat down and rubbed herself with the oil. When she lay back, she pushed her long black hair behind her and closed her eyes. She seemed completely at peace.

I must have watched her for an hour that first day. Occasionally I walked into another section of the house, but I'd invariably drift back to the window. Her every movement excited me. When she stretched, when she turned, I could feel my heart beat faster. I remember, very vividly, the disappointment I felt when she finally went inside.

The next day I found myself wandering compulsively past the living room window. I can remember the excitement I felt when my vigil was finally rewarded. At first I tried to control my voyeurism. I would intentionally leave the house in the afternoon or take a lawn chair into the backyard where I could not see her.

It was on one of these occasions that I first noticed the gray Volkswagen perched on the road that ran behind my house, but I didn't think anything of it at the time. Finally I gave in and my daily watch became a routine.

If I can remember with certainty the first day that I saw Irene, the same is not true of the first day that I conceived the game. I know that it was

within a week or two after she moved in, but that's as close as I can get. It was the change in her habits that made me curious. I was able to keep pretty good tabs on her those first few weeks. Her schedule was fairly consistent and I had purchased a pair of strong binoculars by then.

Up around eleven—(I could see her through the kitchen window)—out to sunbathe at three and back in at five. She rarely went out at night and she had no visitors. Occasionally she would shop for groceries, but even that was done on schedule, every Thursday at one.

Then, one Tuesday, she left the house at ten. I saw her by accident as I walked from the bedroom to the kitchen. Thursday morning the same thing happened. On both days she was back by noon. On a few days I saw her carrying a large reddish portfolio. Kathy had taken drawing classes for a year and I recognized the envelope as the type that art students carry. Maybe she was a student. Summer classes would probably be starting about now, I thought. I decided to find out.

The first time I tried to follow her I failed miserably. I watched from my window, hidden by the curtain, until she left the house. Then I walked to my car. I was very casual, because I did not want to attract her attention—too casual. By the time I backed my car out of the garage she was gone.

The next time I was more careful. First, I left the car in the driveway. Next, I got into it fifteen minutes early. The rest was cake. She took the freeway to the University exit and pulled into the parking lot. I found a space a few cars away and waited until she was out of her car. I was dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved checked shirt. I've been out of school for ten years, but I have a boyish face and handball keeps me in shape. Also, I keep my hair stylishly long. I doubt that I looked much different from any of the students.

Her class was on the fourth floor of an old ivy-covered building. I kept far enough behind her so that she wouldn't notice me. I waited until she was safely inside, then walked by very slowly and glanced in. The room was large. Students were sitting at tables with their art equipment in front of them. Irene was talking to the instructor. He was young and in his first year of teaching, I found out later. His name was Miles J. Bradford. He was married, with two children, and a speciality in Renaissance art.

On my way out, I saw

Brunelle for the first time. He was just under six feet tall and muscular. He was easily in his forties and he didn't fit in. His face was too hard. It was a boxer's face or a longshoreman's face, not a student's face. He had been standing in an alcove by a drinking fountain.

The alcove was off the corridor that led to Irene's class and I am certain no one walking down the corridor would spot him. I would not have noticed him if he had not moved as I passed by. Even so, at the time, he did not register except as a person who looked out of place.

My preoccupation with Irene developed so slowly that I was not consciously aware of it. I began to plan each day around her. If she was out at night I could not sleep until I knew she was safely home. If she did not sunbathe at three o'clock I would worry that she was ill.

I began keeping a diary in which I recorded her activities. There was a feeling of omnipotence every time I filled in a new detail of her life. I had come to regard Irene as a possession. She existed only for my amusement. I began to see myself as some great puppetmaster, manipulating her life unseen.

Finding out her name was easy. She had a car, a Ford. I took the number off the license plate and called the Department of Motor Vehicles. I explained how I had dented the fender of a tan Ford in a shopping center parking lot and had not had time to wait for the owner to come out. I wanted to pay for the damage, but I didn't have the owner's name or address.

The lady at the other end told me how nice it was to find an honest man in this day and age. Then she told me that the car was registered to an Irene White who lived in a downtown apartment. I dressed and drove downtown.

There was no Irene White listed next to the buzzer of apartment 10F, but there *was* an Iris Wright. The Balmoral Apartments were three modern glass and chrome highrises located in an urban renewal area. I did not expect the superintendent to remember one person out of the hundreds who lived there, but he surprised me.

Arthur Levak was a clean, cheerful fat man with an Eastern European accent, who felt that his tenants were his children. I told him my shopping center story and then explained my puzzlement over the different names.

"No need to worry, my boy," he chuckled. "The mystery explains itself. She is an actress."

"You mean. . .?" I asked him.

"A stage name." He nodded. "Personally, I don't see the difference. Irene. Iris." He shrugged.

"An actress! Not married, I hope."

Levak waggled a finger at me and winked. "A lovely girl. You are a lucky man to dent such a lovely girl's fender."

I asked for a description and he painted a picture that fitted my sunbather to a tee.

"With my luck, she probably has a steady boyfriend."

"I don't think so. Louie, the doorman, says she has a few regulars, mostly older men. A young guy like you could step right in."

We talked some more. Yes, she was still living at the Balmoral, but she hadn't been around for a while. Probably on vacation. No, she hadn't been living there long. He asked me if I wanted to leave my address. I had given a phoney name and I didn't feel like making up a phoney address, so I told him that I would just drop by later.

I drove back to my house. I had a lot to think about. Two names I could understand, especially if she was an actress. But why two residences? The more I thought about it, the more confusing it became . . .

THE FIRST night she didn't come home I was in a panic. She had sunbathed as usual at three but had gone in early. At six, I heard her car start. I had trained myself to recognize the sound of her engine and I always left a small window open

in the living room so I could keep track of her if she left at an unusual time.

I stayed up until one in the morning, but she did not return. Had she packed a suitcase? Was she going for several days? I cursed myself for a fool. When I saw her go in early I should have suspected that something unusual was about to happen.

She did not return home until ten the next morning. Then she stopped sunbathing on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On occasion she would repeat her evening disappearance. Something was happening. A boyfriend? Then why did I never see him at her house? More classes? But the summer term was not over.

And there was something else. Or, should I say, someone else. It soon became apparent that someone was parking on the road that runs behind my house. You can see Irene's house from there, but I doubt that you would be noticed by anyone in the house. The angles are all in the watcher's favor and there are some trees to screen you from view.

The car was a Volkswagen. I knew the driver was watching Irene, because he would trail her whenever she left the house. I verified this on two occasions, by trailing them both. The thought of Irene in danger both frightened and excited me. It added mystery to what was already a mystery, but it also raised the specter of losing the object which had become the center of my existence.

The day after I concluded that the Volkswagen was following Irene, I made a decision. I had to know more about Irene and the people she knew. I had to make more complete my mosaic of her life.

I waited until Irene left and the Volkswagen passed the garage. I pulled behind them at a discreet distance. It didn't take me long to figure out where they were going. I took a short cut and parked around the corner from the Balmoral. Then I went through the service entrance and up ten flights of stairs. I was exhausted when I reached her floor. There was an incinerator room that offered a good view of 10F. I checked the corridor and ducked inside.

It was three o'clock when Irene stepped out of the elevator. She looked beautiful. She was wearing a white pants suit with a blue scarf that tied at the neck. Her long black hair cascaded down her back, falling almost to her waist. I don't think I have ever desired a woman as much as I desired her at that moment.

She paused in front of the apartment door and rang the bell. Someone was evidently inside. Who? I peered into the hall as far as I dared, but I could not see who opened the door.

It was ten minutes more before I heard the elevator open again. It was the man I had seen outside of Irene's art class, the man in the Volkswagen. He moved quietly down the hall, pasuing outside 10F. He listened at the door and took a set of keys out of his pocket. When he found one that fitted, he opened the door very slowly. Once he glanced in my direction, but I pulled back in time. When I looked back again the door was closed and he was inside.

There was no sound for a few moments. Then I heard a woman scream and the sound of men arguing. It was confusing. Everything was happening down the hall and behind closed doors. It was muffled and blurred. There was a crash. I remember that distinctly. Finally, there was silence.

I am ashamed to say it, but my first thoughts were for my own safety. Fear paralyzed me. It kept me in that dark small room, sweating and trembling. What was I to do? Irene was in danger. If I left the safety of my anonymity, I might be in danger. Fear made me dizzy and disoriented. The desire to help her and the fear of danger tore me in two.

After a while, my breathing became more regular. I began to relax. I opened the closet door and looked down the corridor. No one was in sight. I edged down the hall and stopped in front of 10F. There was no sound from inside. I tried the door. It opened inward onto a modern living room. Lots of chrome and natural woods, Some plastic—no people. There was a short hallway leading off to the left.

I shut the hall door and walked down it on tiptoe. The kitchen was deserted. So was the bathroom. The door at the end of the hall was ajar. My throat was dry. My pulse was pounding. There was no sound from inside the room. From where I was standing I could see an open window and a curtain blowing softly in the summer breeze. I stepped into the room.

The man in the Volkswagen was sprawled on his back near the bed. His skull had been crushed and the blood covered paperweight that had been used lay nearby. I became nauseated. My stomach heaved and I covered my mouth with my hand. I looked away and breathed deeply.

When I was back in control I looked at the other body. I remember exactly how I felt when I discovered that it was Irene. All things were floating, unreal. I was weak and shaking. Our bodies protect us at such times. Adrenalin produces a dreamlike state that permits us to function.

I can remember crouching over the body. Her head had struck the nightstand. Drops of red speckled her pure white blouse. I think I cried.

In my dream I floated to the dead man. There were a wallet and keys. I placed them in my pocket. Fingerprints! I panicked for a moment. Then I took out my handkerchief and polished the bedroom doorknob. There was the front door, too, and a few other items. I took care of them on my way out.

I was afraid to drive, in my state, but I was more afraid to stay near the apartment house. I found a small bar several blocks away, ordered a stiff drink and moved to a booth in the back to think.

The wallet had belonged to Floyd Brunelle, Brunelle Investigations, Inc.. The address on his business cards placed him in a fashionable district. There was little else of interest in the wallet. A few credit cards, a picture of a young woman taken several years ago and fading and a slip of paper with some numbers on it, which took on importance only later.

When I had calmed down sufficiently to think clearly, I was able to arrive at a series of conclusions. First, by taking the wallet and the keys, I had implicated myself in a double murder and made off with evidence in a murder investigation.

Second, there was no way that I could return the evidence to the apartment. By now, the police might be there. Even if they weren't, I knew that I could never go back into that bedroom with those two bodies lying there.

Surrendering the evidence to the police was out of the question. I would be the prime suspect. I tried to view my behavior as the police would. What I had done was sick. Using binoculars to spy on a beautiful woman, following her, waiting in the incinerator closet—it had sex perversion written all over it.

That left me with one alternative. I drove to my house and parked in the garage. It was four-thirty. I slipped across the street and through the hedge that surrounded Irene's house. Her back door was unlocked.

I had never been inside her house, yet it seemed so familiar. I had seen bits and pieces

through the binoculars, but seeing it all had a *déjà vue* quality. The furnishings were simple, but in good taste. They contrasted sharply with the "Jet set" furnishings at the downtown apartment. A few paintings hung on the walls. Some were initialed I.W. They were seascapes and landscapes. None were particularly good.

There were a few books on the shelves—standard college texts, a few best sellers. A macrame wall hanging graced the wall over the fireplace.

I hesitated before going into her bedroom. I can't explain what it felt like to enter that room. I had fantasized myself making love to Irene so many times. I had pictured myself being invited into that room. And now I was here and she was dead.

I found the pictures and the list underneath some sweaters in a bottom drawer. The list was on a sheet of yellow lined paper. It had five names and addresses on it and dollar figures beside each one. None of the names meant anything to me.

The pictures were another story. Seeing them was almost as great a shock as seeing Irene dead. In the pictures she was very much alive. I could not see her face clearly in the prints, but I had seen enough of her body to recognize her. She was in various positions with five different men. The men's faces were very visible. I took the list and the pictures with me. I didn't want anyone to see them, to see her like that.

I looked at my watch. It was almost six. The downtown offices would be deserted, but the buildings would still be open to accomodate those who were working late. I parked several blocks from Brunelle's office. It was in a fourteen-story glass-and-steel building. I took the elevator up. The security guard never looked at me.

Someone was still working inside, so I stepped into the stairwell and waited. At six-thirty an efficient looking young man turned out the lights and locked the door. I waited a few minutes and unlocked it with the keys I had taken from Brunelle's body.

The office did not fit with my picture of how a private eye's office should look. Instead of a seedy one-room cubbyhole with an old wooden desk and a swivel chair, I found a reception room and an I.B.M. electric typewriter. Brunelle had been doing well.

It took me some time to search his office. There was nothing in the filing cabinets and I searched his desk without result. Then I noticed a safe in a

corner of the office and I remembered the numbers on the paper in Brunelle's wallet.

It was the only folder in the safe. It had no label. Just a list of names and a detailed record of Irene White's movements for the last two months. I checked the names on Brunelle's list with the names on the list I had found in Irene's house. There was one extra name on Brunelle's list. It took me approximately thirty seconds to remember who Miles J. Bradford was . . .

THE BODIES WERE discovered by Arthur Levak at noon of the next day. It took the police a day to figure out who Brunelle was. His wife told them after she saw his picture in the evening paper. The official theory was that Brunelle had been hired by the wife of an adulterous husband and had surprised Irene with her lover. The husband had killed Brunelle, and the only witness, then escaped. Probably while I was cowering in the hall closet.

I had my own theory and it sickened me. The problem was that I had to prove and disprove it. I could not reveal my role in the murder until I could produce the murderer. I got up my nerve and dialed Harvey Karch, the first name on the list, at his law office.

"Mr. Karch?" I asked him.

"Speaking."

"Irene White is dead and I have the pictures."

There was silence for a moment. Then, "I am afraid I don't know an Irene White."

"You may have known her under a different name. That doesn't change the fact that I have the pictures."

"I see. How much do you want?"

"Not a penny, Mr. Karch. What I want is information. Were you being blackmailed?"

"Yes."

"Have you read the morning paper?"

"Yes."

"Is that the girl who was blackmailing you?"

He didn't answer right away. Finally, he said, "I don't think I want to continue this discussion."

"I don't think that you have a choice. You either talk to me now or the police later. You would make a great suspect and, even if you were cleared, your career would be ruined."

"All right. It's the same girl. She must have had a regular racket going. A year ago, my wife and I were thinking of divorce. I met her at a bar. We spent the night at her apartment. A week later, she called me at home. She said it would be a one-shot deal—ten

thousand dollars for the pictures and the negatives. I paid. She delivered. I never heard from her again."

"Thank you, Mr. Karch. The pictures will be in the mail to you tomorrow. One more thing. Where were the pictures taken?"

"It was an apartment house. The— I'll have it in a second— the Balmoral. And the name. You said Irene something. That's what threw me. I knew her as Eileen Stewart."

The other four had the same story to tell. A one-time payment, a different name. Which left me with Miles J. Bradford, the only man with no picture and the only name on Brunelle's list that was not on Irene's. Bradford had to be the killer. His wife must have hired Brunelle to follow Bradford when she suspected they were having an affair. Brunelle broke in on them and Bradford killed them both.

But how to prove it?

It took me a while to figure out a plan. I needed proof that Bradford was the killer—something solid that I could take to the police. I also needed someone to corroborate my story—someone who could be a witness on my behalf. If my idea worked, I would have both . . .

* * *

"Mr. Levak, do you remember me?"

Levak looked at me from beneath his bushy eyebrows for a moment. Then he smiled.

"The boy with the fender? I never forget a face." His expression changed to one of sorrow. "A terrible thing. You heard what happened to that beautiful girl? A tragedy."

He shook his head. He seemed so sincere. I made up my mind—I would trust him. I had no choice, really.

"Mr. Levak, can we go inside. I have something important to discuss with you."

Levak looked at the hallway as if realizing for the first time that he had kept me standing in the corridor.

"Come in, come in. Sit down. Can I get you some tea?"

"No thank you."

I sat down on an old soft green sofa. It was the apartment of a single man, a bachelor of long standing.

"Mr. Levak, I believe I can trust you. I'm in very serious trouble and you're the only one who can help me."

"*Me?* What could I do?"

"I didn't tell you the truth when I came to see you that first time about Irene."

"You didn't?"

"Mr. Levak, I know who killed Irene and the man they found with her. I was in the incinerator closet in the hallway when she was killed."

"Then you must have seen the killer leave the apartment?"

I told him, "No," and then I told him why and everything else about the whole sordid affair. He was a sympathetic listener, nodding often and making little clucking sounds with his tongue from time to time.

"That's why I think Bradford killed Irene and Brunelle. I am sure that he was scheduled to be her next victim. She probably took his class in order to get close to him."

Levak leaned back in his armchair. "Astonishing! Blackmail—murder! I feel like I'm on television. But what can we do to get you out of this mess?"

"We can prove that Bradford is the killer. When Irene came to Ten-F on the day she was killed, someone, the killer, let her in. That means the killer had to have a key.

"I suggest we call Bradford from Ten-F and tell him we know about the killings. I'll say that I want to meet him there. Then we wait inside and lock the door. If Bradford unlocks the door, we have our man and the key as proof."

Levak stood up and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"You're a brave man and I

will help you. I don't think it would be good if we were seen together. I'll go ahead and make sure the police are not around. You follow me."

I waited five minutes, then followed Levak to the apartment. The police were nowhere in sight and the door was open. Levak was waiting in the bedroom.

"I get a chill standing here," I said.

"Such a nice girl! It must have been a shock to see her like that."

The scene flodded back and I did shiver.

"I wonder where he hid?" I mused.

"Who?" Levak asked.

"Her accomplice. I just realized that Irene must have had someone working with her. Otherwise, how did she take the pictures. Maybe he was in the closet."

I walked over to the closet and turned toward the bed, said, "No, it couldn't have been the closet, because the angle is completely wrong. The men were all full face in those pictures. That means the pictures had to be taken over the headboard or . . ."

There was fresh putty on a spot on the wall just above the headboard.

"Find something?" Levak asked.

"Mr. Levak, there was a hole in this wall. Irene's accomplice must have rented the apartment next door. He drilled a hole through the wall and shot the pictures through it."

"Through the wall? That doesn't seem likely. Do you have one of the pictures so that we can check the angle?"

"No. The pictures are at my house. But I'm certain I'm right. If we find out who rented the apartment next door, we'll have Irene's accomplice. He might even have taken a picture of the killer."

"The list? Is that with the pictures?"

"Yes. Mr. Levak, who is the tenant next door?"

"No one rents the apartment next door. I kept it vacant after the Fosters moved in June."

"Vacant. Then he must have broken in the night before or that day. Let's go next door and see if there is anything there."

"There isn't. I cleaned thoroughly."

"Since the Fosters?"

"Since the murders. Right before I puttied the hole over the bed."

It was then that I noticed the automatic in Levak's hand. It was then that I remembered something that Karch had said. He had had an affair with an Eileen Stewart a year ago. When I first spoke with Levak,

he said that Irene had not been living the Balmoral at least a year before, yet Levak had lied. It was clear now why.

"Mr. Bradford was never in this room. *I* was. We planned to have Mr. Bradford visit soon, but Brunelle spoiled our plans. You see, Brunelle was not hired by a jealous wife to tail an adulterous husband. Brunelle was an adulterous husband. He was our last payday. I thought we were through with him, but he wanted to find out who set him up.

"I was meeting Irene to plan our filming session with Mr. Bradford when Brunelle barged in. He struck Irene and she fell against the night stand. When he saw the blood, he knelt down to see if she was all right and I killed him with the paperweight. Irene was dead already. Now I have to kill you."

I swept the heavy table lamp off the night stand. It struck Levak's arm and the shot only grazed my arm. I bowled him over and we fell against the wall. The impact knocked the breath out of him, but he kept fighting. The gun fell beneath us and I groped for it with my right hand. He tried to gouge me with his left. I butted him and my hand closed on the handle. I brought the gun up to use as a club. I swung it, but he blocked my swing and jarred the trigger. There was an explosion and Mr. Levak's mouth dropped open in surprise . . .

The triple murders at the Balmoral have never been solved. I returned the pictures to the men on the lists and destroyed what I didn't return. I had one scare when some police came to my house to question me about my neighbor, but they were only looking for leads.

Fall brought a change in my fortunes. I got a job in San Diego and moved away from the house and its memories. Before I moved I gave my binoculars to a friend. I don't think I'll be tempted again.

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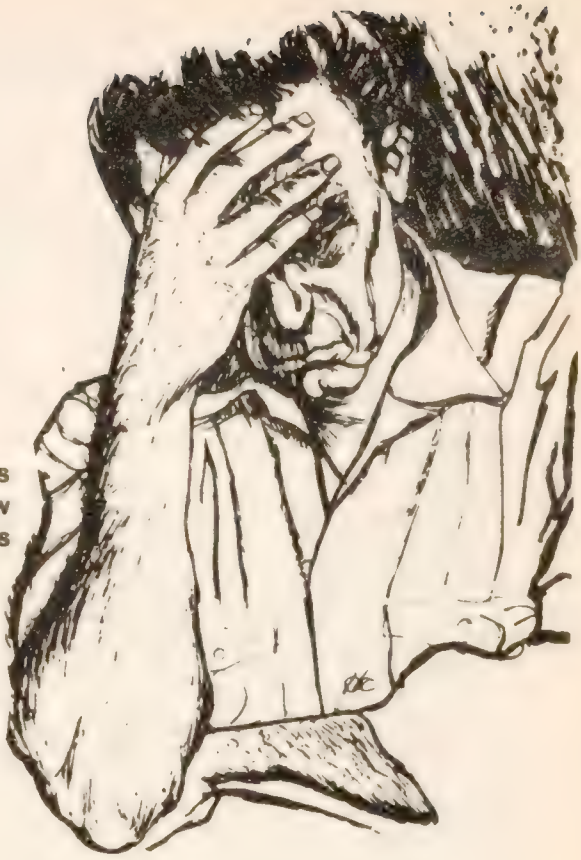

He had done his best to express the love he felt for Dolly. Now he could only wait for the cops to come and take him from her.

by KATHLEEN HERSHEY

HE WAS A HUGE, huge man, but he loved soft things, so he broke a small bit of the yarn and pushed the fibers about between his stubby fingers. It was pink and soft and fluffy when he rubbed it. Dolly's hair was soft like that but it was yellow, almost white. Dolly fixed it that way and he liked it. Yellow-white hair was nice.

He touched Dolly's hair one more time, so gently, ever so gently now. Her face was turned away from him on the pillow; and her soft hair spilled about so strangely—like a little girl's hair when she has been playing outside in the wind, kind of mussed. It was nice, very nice. He loved touching Dolly's hair. He wanted to remember how it felt.

He would keep the yarn always to remind him of Dolly. He was not sure he would be able to see Dolly any more after today, but he would always remember her. She was kind to him. He pinched one end of the broken scrap of yarn between his left thumb and forefinger,

and with his right hand wound it slowly, slowly around the ring finger of his left hand three times.

It was hard to tie and he got discouraged but he kept right on until he was sure it would stay because this was important. He wished someone would tie it into a bow for him. It would be nice that way. Mother used to use that trick to remind him of things. It was hard for him to remember things. He wanted to be reminded of Dolly. She had been so kind. She understood about him. She was Mother's friend too. Dolly always did her hair at the shop just like Mother wanted her to.

He examined the pink yarn twisted on his finger. He sniffed at it. It smelled faintly of Dolly's perfume. Dolly smelled so good all the time.

This bit of yarn was off the end of the scarf Dolly had been making and she had not quite finished it. That thought made him feel sad. Dolly did lots of good things with yarn like this. She made little hats and slippers and sofa blankets. She told him they were afghans. That made him think of something. He stroked her cheek. Yes, she was cold.

He stood up by the bed and looked through the door to the living room. He saw the prettiest afghan carefully folded over the back of the couch. It was her favorite of all the things she had made with yarn. She had told him so herself. He shuffled quickly to get it for he did not want Dolly to get any colder.

When he returned to the bedroom he slipped her white, high-heeled shoe off and laid it on the carpet beside the one that had fallen off earlier. Carefully he draped the cheerful afghan over her stockinged legs and unrolled it at her neck. He lifted her hair from beneath it and spread the yellow softness out again. He covered her cheek with her hair. He did not like the way her face looked now.

He thought of his own face. It was beginning to sting a little. He touched his face with his hands. It was sticky and the salt of his sweat on his burly hands made it sting more. He winced. Then he shrugged. It did not matter—but Mother would like him to wash. She would want him to look nice when someone came.

He was too tired to wash. He was very tired and besides he did not want Dolly to be alone. He thought someone would come soon. Dolly's landlady had seen them and he thought she would call someone to come.

He saw the pink string on his finger had turned red. Now it

was spoiled a little. He touched his tongue to the spot. It was fuzzy on the edges and would not have had a taste before—but now it tasted funny, like when he cut his lip shaving. He did not like the taste of blood.

He rubbed his head with his hands and listened to the faint sound when the yarn brushed the coarse hair by his ears. Then he could not hear it any more because of the sirens. The sirens were getting louder.

He sat on the bed by Dolly and waited. It would not be long now. Still it seemed a long wait before he heard the footsteps on the stairway. He watched the two men in blue uniforms come in. He thought one looked familiar but the other was a stranger to him and seemed upset.

"Good God, Al!"

The one called Al put his gun back in its holder and walked reluctantly to the bed. He lifted the afghan and looked down.

"Dead," he called out to his partner. "Strangled with a knitted scarf. She might have been pretty. Poor girl! I know the pitiful devil beside her. Know him from before, but never anything like this. Thought he was harmless all these years. Look at his face. She put up a fight. Scratched his face to pieces!"

The other officer sputtered, "He looks like an ape—bloody, ugly ape.

"Yeah, and he's almost that smart. Come on, fella. George, isn't it?"

George held his left hand out toward the one called Al and tried to talk as clearly as he could. It was important.

"Please, Mister, tie my string in a bow. I want to remember how Dolly looked before I tried to kiss her."

COMING SOON:

A "DIFFERENT" STORY

DO NOT FOLD, SPINDLE OR MUTILATE

A Tale to Rival H. P. Lovecraft

by MARCIA K. BROWN

Before killing your wife, you'd better make sure she is guilty.

A BETTER WAY

by WILLIAM E. CHAMBERS

BEN SAUNDERS guided his truck along the dusty sun-baked highway while mentally rehashing the argument he'd had the night before with Lorraine. Usually they bickered about money, or rather her lack of respect for it. But this time they had argued about her overfriendliness with Montague Jarret, the painter of abstract art, who had recently acquired the apartment adjoining their own.

"He's a phony," Saunders told his tipsy wife when they returned home. "And his paintings make no sense."

"Listen to the art critic!"

"Well, he's never even sold one. Speaking of sales, how much did that cost me?"

Saunders pointed to a two-foot-high statue of the legendary Greek god Mercury standing on a pedestal in a corner of the living room.

"Cost! Cost! Cost!" Lorraine cried, marching into the bedroom. Saunders followed and watched as she slipped her stunning figure out of the re-

vealing cocktail dress that had encased it. "All you ever think of is money—money—money."

"I wish *you'd* think of it once in a while. Last year I made forty grand with nothing to show for it but debts."

"Nothing?" Lorraine sauntered past him, clad only in bikini panties and a cutaway bra. "You've got *me*, Ben."

The sight of his red-haired wife's near-nakedness filled him with desire. He extended a calloused hand toward her shoulder but she deftly avoided his grip and ducked into the bathroom.

Ben Saunders said, "You weren't so quick to avoid Jarret's roving hands or the hands of some of your admirers in the past, either."

"What an imagination!" Lorraine slammed the bathroom door. "Still jealous after seven years of marriage. Afraid I'll leave my little toad of a trucker for some handsome prince or artist?"

"Jarret may have looks but eating off orange crates isn't your speed."

Remembering the word speed brought Saunders back to the present. He had been doing 70 while the law of the land was 55. The black-and-white car with the flashing roof light that was gaining on his truck told him this infraction had not gone unnoticed. He pulled over to the road's grassy right shoulder and accepted his ticket without offering an explanation. Hell, he thought, they wouldn't understand anyway.

* * *

Saunders had made far better time traveling than he had expected to, which meant he must have stayed quite a while at the 70-mile-an-hour clip. He hadn't planned to return home until the following morning but now, having delivered his freight so early, he could probably get back in time to catch a couple of hours' sleep and still manage to haul another load tomorrow. This would pay for the ticket and yield him a pretty good profit, too.

Cheered by this prospect, Saunders decided to break a standing rule and call Lorraine. He had stopped calling her long distance several years ago because she never seemed especially glad to hear from him and, besides, he had expenses enough. However, after last night's argument, he felt an apologetic call might be just the balm necessary to soothe her frayed emotions. Stopping his rig at the nearest roadside diner, Saunders stepped up to the pay phone, deposited the necessary coins and caught his

breath as a familiar male voice answered, "Hello? *Hello?* Nobody's there. . ."

Saunders's hand trembled as he cradled the receiver. Cold fury gripped him as he walked back to his truck. Obviously Lorraine didn't have enough respect for him to take the precaution of answering the phone herself. But then again, why should she? After all, she had him well figured out. He was an ugly little meal ticket who paid highly for the honor of possessing—very rarely—a beautiful woman. Well, things would change now, Saunders swore. He'd divorce her.

The sight of the Highway Patrol car curbed his impulse to speed. His emotions calmed automatically as his driving slowed, causing somber reflections to stir in his mind. The cold, hard consequences of divorce gradually became clear to him. Lorraine certainly wouldn't agree to a divorce without demanding a whopping alimony.

Saunders cursed the night, the speed limit and his wife as he strained his mind for a solution. Hiring a private detective occurred to him. If he could prove adultery, perhaps then he could cut her loose with little or no compensation. But that brought other problems into play. Detectives were expensive, there was no guarantee of success and, most important, if Lorraine were caught in the act, she just might be spiteful enough to shame him with a public scandal.,

Saunders thought about the reputation he had built over the years as one of the most respected independent freight haulers in the business. If it came to light that he had been paying while his wife was playing, he would become the laughing stock of the industry. There had to be a better way.

The better way occurred to him an hour after garaging his truck, as he sat drinking beer in a near-empty bar. At first he dismissed the idea outright. But, after re-examining the alternatives and downing several more beers, it seemed the only solution left.

The plan Saunders formed was simple—enter his apartment through the front door as any burglar skilled at picking locks would do, shatter Lorraine's skull with that brand new statue of Mercury, call the police and tell them he had just returned home from having a few beers after work and found the body. . .

* * *

Jarret, visible through the glass doors of his terrace, was

working at his easel as Ben Saunders wheeled around the apartment building into the carport behind it. He encountered no one in the elevator or corridors. Lorraine must have heard his key being inserted into the lock because she shouted from the bedroom, "Ben? Is that you?"

Instead of answering, he slipped the statue off its pedestal. The bedroom door opened slowly and Lorraine peered uncertainly into the darkened living room. She said, "Ben? *Ben!* Why don't you answer? Put on the light, for God's sake!"

Saunders hid the statue behind his back as Lorraine strode impatiently into the living room and flicked on the light herself.

"What's wrong with you, Ben? You—you're *drunk*!"

"My thoughts were never more sober. Think I don't know about your boyfriend next door?"

"What are you—what's that in your hand?"

Saunders lunged forward and swung. Lorraine barely sidestepped in time, stumbling on her negligée as the statue swished past her head. She fell, screaming, as he swung at her again. Her scream was cut short by the sound of stone striking flesh. Saunders squatted beside his wife and raised his arm for another blow when someone grabbed his wrist.

He whirled, straightened and snapped his wrist free from the grip of Montague Jarret. The bearded, long-haired young man brushed past him, knelt beside Lorraine and felt her pulse. His complexion was ashen as he said, "She's dead."

Saunders brandished his weapon menacingly and said, "Where the hell did you come from?"

"The terrace. I was working. Stepped outside for a breath of air—heard a scream and hopped over."

"Is that how you've been meeting Lorraine, too?"

"*Meeting?*"

"Don't play innocent. It was you who answered when I called home this evening."

"Called home?" Jarret's puzzled look suddenly disappeared. "*That* call! That was *you*!"

"Yeah."

"Isn't your number WE-6-4382?"

"You've memorized it, eh?"

"How could I forget it? Your wife happened to glance at my phone last night and remarked how close our numbers were."

"Close?"

"Mine is WE 6-4381."

"Then she—" Saunders's body began to shake. The statue slipped from his limp fingers. "My *God*! I dialed the wrong number!"

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